• A BEST-SELLER GOTHIC NOVEL •

SOME BECKONING WRAITH

Could love and common sense overcome the vengeful spirit that haunted Malvern Manor?

by Paulette Warren

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The old fort still stood. I had to go there. I had to see it. I was in the grip of an emotion I had never before experienced; a sensuous urgency that made me understand the weaknesses of everyone who had ever turned recklessly away from logic and good sense to pursue some beckoning wraith.

PAGAN—YOU'RE MAD. TURN BACK, PAGAN. RUN! RUN! RUN!

I ran, but in the wrong direction. Up through the forest and over the rocks toward Rebel Hill. There were open places in the forest where thick branches blocked out the sun and made cool caves, and it was in these that I found Abigail Bennington again; as I'd found her in the graveyard and at my window the night before.

She vanished in the sun because she needed the darkness . . .

SOME BECKONING WRAITH

PAULETTE WARREN

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One

THE AIR WAS HOT, heavy, dead, still. A storm was brewing, and all the trees in the forest hung motionless, waiting for it.

I waited also, a little tense because I was a stranger and unfamiliar with the violent moods of this new land; a stranger, yet I belonged: it was Dabney's land and I belonged where Dabney was.

At the moment he was several miles to the east, fishing on a small lake where we'd usurped the holiday cottage of one of his friends for a week-end. I'd roamed in the opposite direction, up into country so wild and primitive that I had to keep reminding myself we were but a scant hundred miles north of Manhattan, New York City, U. S. A.

"One of your colonies in the old days, sweet," Dabney had said. "Look it over and see if you want it back."

"Huh! I'd replied. "I've been given to understand that even the Indians won't take it."

This land was far different from my English moors and Cornish coasts—as different as was Dabney from the white knight of my childhood who would come to carry me away to the gay court of his father, the king.

My "white knight" turned out to be a tousle-haired young man on a bicycle who one day pulled off the

road to ask, "Do you know where a guy can get a Coke in this God-forsaken country?"

And the king's court was transformed into four disapproving relatives in New York City—Mark Cater and Sam Cater, rock-solid Wall Street figures to whom viewing with alarm was a way of life, and Mildred Cater, a sister who by becoming Mildred Sain thus brought into the family circle the fourth alarm-viewing member.

I was fortunate in one respect. The four of them were so habitually disappointed with Dabney, the black-sheep fifth, they found little time to dissect the young wife he brought back from Europe.

In fact, I seemed merely to take my place in Dabney's gallery of freaks. Cursed with a wanderlust entirely alien to the fiber of the Cater clan, he'd wasted much inherited substance in roaming the world. Hence, a hand-carved and totally obscene Indian god, a hideous South American head skillfully shrunk to fist-size, an Arabian lance with dried blood still adhering to it—and a bride from Wales. All pretty much in the same lamentable category.

"Damn it all, Dab! You're twenty-seven years old now! You've had your post-collegiate fling. When the devil are you going to settle down?"

That had been Mark's appraisal of the situation, but Dabney had tried to blur his sharp edges for my benefit. "Don't take Mark seriously—or any of them. They mean well—and they're right, of course. Time to settle down now and make something of ourselves. What would you suggest?"

I'd been with him a month at the time—a week as an acquaintance, a week as a lover, and two weeks as

a wife—long enough to throw his favorite catch-phrase back at him. "Let's play it by ear."

His handsome little-boy grin and his sigh of satisfaction were my reward. "Honey, you're a great comfort to me. You make the scene. How would you like to have our first brat on a surfboard off Diamond Head?"

"Wonderful, but getting pregnant is far easier than getting to Hawaii. If I'm not mistaken, you said you're about broke."

"After a manner of speaking. I'm down to the nest-egg again."

The nest-egg was six thousand dollars left him by a feeble-minded aunt because she'd loved him. This particular aunt had also given him a bedraggled, stuffed, blue teddy bear that had been around the world with him and occupied an honored niche in his duffle bag. I'd questioned the presence of the blue teddy bear only once—while it sat on a window sill watching us make love in a small Sussex inn.

"My God! Does that beast have to be a *witness?*"

It was the only time Dabney had become even remotely frosty. "Where I go, Ludwig does."

I had been sorely tempted to put eyes and nose and a mouth on my douche bag and thus have my own little monster, but I didn't bother; I simply came to tolerate Ludwig, though hardly to love him. . . .

But now, in an almost inaccessible wilderness due north of Manhattan, it was going to rain.

I had been moving in the general direction of a landmark called Rebel Hill. There was a story behind the inaccessibility of Rebel Hill and the country around it, but certainly there were civilized routes of ingress.

I'd pushed ahead with an almost childish spirit of adventure and recklessness, enjoying the solitude and the primitive wilderness about me.

And it was then that I found the graveyard and a definite change came about.

The abruptness possibly had something to do with it. I had considered myself as being alone, isolated from all the living things on earth. Then I pushed through a wall of high bushes and came into a clearing, and I was no longer alone.

I was in the presence of the dead.

Instantly, macabre thoughts went through my mind—thoughts that had no right to be there—almost as though they had been instilled by a spiritual force trying to communicate with me.

I thought of time and death and how they were not really associated; how time had nothing to do with the power of death.

The thought was frightening. Somehow, it had to do with the *aliveness* of the dead, although, in truth, I did not understand it myself. I only knew that in this deserted, abandoned cemetery, time meant nothing. A week, a month, a year, a hundred years—the mere presence of the dead, there in the hot silence under the lowering sky, provided mute testimony to the timelessness of it all. And it was as if some brooding personality had been patiently awaiting my arrival to tell me this.

I shook the morbid thoughts from my mind as one shakes away a daydream.

The graveyard was situated on sort of a shelf, a rock ridge bordering its upper side whence it sloped down into forest below. The grass came well above my

knees, and beneath my feet as I moved forward was a springy mat, the dead grasses of many long summers.

I surmised from the look of the place that it had not been used for generations, and an inspection of the stones, worn, tilted and fallen, bore this out.

They were mostly brownstone slabs, curved at the top with the statistics of the dead almost worn away. I found one date—*June 4, 1781*. A name: *Abigail Bennington, age 22*. On another: *loving husband and father who departed this vale of sorrow*—

The dates I found spanned more than one hundred years, the earliest, 1777, the most recent, 1885.

I turned from this research to contemplate the present: The sky was darkening, and heavy thunderheads were rolling and pitching close to the peaks of the hills. And yet there was no thunder or lightning or any warning drops.

Utter stillness. It was in contrast to this that the voice I heard tightened my skin.

Actually, it was a pleasant, childish voice lilting quaint words to an aimless, singsong tune:

Satan slept at Rebel Hill
When the redcoats came.
He hung the brave young Richard,
And Cain was Satan's name.

I stood frozen. Then the singer appeared and my heart started beating again.

It was a girl, somewhere in her mid-teens, I estimated. She appeared from among the rocks of the bordering ridge and presented a figure as odd as the song she'd sung. Her hair was golden-rod yellow, the

one bright spot in the whole dark storm-threatened scene.

She was barefoot. The shapeless gray shift she wore came just to her knees. She looked down at me, smiling, and showed no fear whatever as she threaded her way between the boulders toward me.

I called, "Hello," in a rather uncertain voice, but she remained silent, appearing to maintain an attitude of friendly curiosity. Then, when she got close enough, I saw a subtle emptiness in her face. The features were regular, even attractive, yet there was the detached look of a retarded person.

"What were you singing?" I asked.

She was drawn by the bright pattern of the sweater Dab had bought me in a swank Fifth Avenue shop. She came close and touched it.

"Soft," she smiled. "It's going to rain."

"Yes—is there any shelter hereabouts?"

The girl glanced off toward her left, then she laughed. "Rain doesn't hurt."

"No, I suppose it doesn't. My name is Pagan. What's yours?"

"Dee Elder. Trubal Elder is my grandfather."

There was pride in this declaration marking Trubal Elder as a man of importance.

"Do you live out here?"

"I live in the *Hollow*."

Her inflection made me think of the Hollow as a civilized place rather than a mere topographical description. "Is it far?"

She giggled and the mental retardation appeared more clearly. "Over the swamp. Trubal'll be mad."

"You mean you ran away?"

"I like to come here." She pointed. "Black snakes live under that there stone."

I moved away from the stone automatically and glanced about uneasily. The lowering clouds had brought premature twilight, and the scene reminded me of a Dore etching—Dante's world awaiting Judgment.

"Hadn't we better find some shelter, Dee?"

The girl seemed to have a mind that stayed always a little behind. She was regarding me through eyes that had been bright blue in the light but now turned dark as the skies darkened.

"Pagan," she said, "that's evil, isn't it? That's the name for bad people."

"Not necessarily. You see, when I was a little girl, I couldn't pronounce my name. It was Pegeen. But I made it sound like Pagan so that's what people called me. It's really a kind of nickname."

I doubted that she'd followed a word of the explanation, but now her mind caught up with my query about shelter. "It won't rain until much later. Just a sprinkle now."

"With that sky?"

"That's a dust sky. It doesn't rain much at first." Again she pointed. "That's Abigail's grave. She's why I come sometimes. She calls me."

Abigail? The name was instantly familiar. Where had I heard it? Then, as Dee Elder moved past me, I remembered reading the name on a stone only minutes earlier.

Dee had dropped to her knees in front of the weath-

erbeaten slab and was running a finger over the letters like a child struggling with a word on a blackboard.

"Abigail . . . Bennington . . . 1779. She was twenty-two years old. Her heart broke when they hung Richard."

Things were going a little too fast for me. Sunlight probably would have changed everything. But there in the semi-darkness it was suddenly as though this whole episode had been staged; the scenery built, the lines written and rehearsed, and now the act itself presented for the benefit of some brooding unseen audience.

Then the applause. A clap of earth-shaking summer thunder that crashed down from overhead and made the scenery tremble.

I cringed as from a blow. But Dee could have been stone-deaf for all the effect the thunderclap had upon her. She looked up at me and smiled. "Abigail is here," she said.

Expecting a deluge at any moment, I replied sharply: "Where else would she be, child? Come we've got to find shelter."

"She doesn't have to stay here. She can go anywhere but to heaven. That's where Richard is."

Superstition and simple-mindedness often went together. I told myself this as I took the girl's arm and lifted her from her knees. At that moment the sky was brilliantly lit by the most vicious fork of lightning I had ever seen. I could have sworn its lethal tongue flashed not six feet over our heads.

The roles Dee and I had been playing reversed instantly. I'd brought her up from her knees, but now I collapsed on to mine.

She looked down at me with placid wonder. "Are you afraid of lightning?"

I could almost smell the brimstone but, shamed by my conduct, I tried to be brave. "It's—it's just new to me."

"It was too far away to hit us."

And then a new dramatic twist in this improbable drama. A new figure appeared. I was able to find a comparison in a scene from *Dr. Faustus*, where Satan appears in a billow of red smoke; even though there wasn't any red smoke, nor did the figure resemble the stock image of the Evil One. He was thin and tall, and the clothes he wore appeared to have been a part of him for many seasons. His face was ancient and leathery, and his scowl seemed permanently built in. Slung in the crook of one arm was a rifle.

"What are you doing with the girl?" he demanded.

"Doing? Why nothing—I—"

"Hello, Grandpa Trubal. You out hunting?"

"You know what I'm hunting, young lady. I'm hunting you."

"Abigail was calling me. I came to see her."

"I want you to stay away from these spirits. I keep telling you—they're no good for you."

"Abigail's troubled, Grandpa Trubal."

"Abigail's always troubled, but it isn't your affair. Now you get on home."

The child was not in the least frightened by his harshness. After she smiled at me and literally faded off into the underbrush, Trubal Elder turned his disapproval on me, wasting no time on politeness.

"What you doing here?"

"Is this private property?"

"It's no place for a lone woman to be pushing around by herself."

"I'm quite capable of finding my way about, thank you."

He added a speculative glint to the hostility in his eyes. "You must be from Patch Lake."

"Yes. My husband and I are up for a week-end."

"You're foreign."

"I'm English," I replied with a dignity that, I hoped, covered my anger.

"English?"

"Yes. Is that so exceptional?"

It certainly appeared to be. He squinted at Abigail Bennington's grave as though he expected a comment from that direction. "Odd, mighty odd. You looking for something in particular?"

"See here—I resent being cross-questioned. Is this your land? Do you hold title to it?"

His snort eloquently reflected his general attitude. "It may surprise you, but people can get lost in these hills. Some of it's bad country."

"I assure you, I'm not lost."

"Then you'd better be getting on. That sky'll be breaking open shortly, and you won't know one direction from another." He waved the snout of his rifle without taking it off his arm. "Patch Lake's back that way."

"Thank you for your courtesy."

"Never mind. Just watch yourself."

With that he moved off toward the ridge and disappeared among the rocks, leaving me so angry that my head ached.

But at the same time, I was sorry to see him go. In that desolate, deserted place it was better to have a hostile old curmudgeon to talk to than no one at all.

Still, I refused to be intimidated. Returning to Patch Lake, practically on orders from Trubal Elder, was a little too much to swallow. But I didn't want to stay in that graveyard, either. So, using Rebel Hill as a landmark, I defied Trubal and the storm and tramped off in that direction. A foreigner indeed! My heritage was as deeply rooted in this country as that of Trubal Elder, whoever he was. Thanks to my Aunt Elizabeth and her preoccupation with genealogy, I could boast a line that pre-dated the American Revolution.

In a vindictive mood, I wished that my Grandfather Higgins could have been there to tell that surly rebel a few of the truths about the Revolution. It had been Grandfather Higgins' favorite subject.

A man who had died in the hope of a glorious resurrection and a return of Britain to the proud days of Rudyard Kipling, my grandfather had never forgiven men like Washington and Jefferson. My gentle grandmother used to worry about his blood pressure when he got going on that subject.

"Treasonous rebels, every one!" That was his considered judgment. "And the hand they bit so ungratefully, protected them even then! Where would they have been without the British Navy for the next hundred and fifty years?"

If Grandfather Higgins had known of my marriage to Dabney, he would have rested as uneasily in his

grave as—well, as the Elder's precious Abigail Bennington seemed to be resting!

Draining off my indignation thus, I pushed on through the thick woods and soon drained off most of my physical energy also. It was then that I wished Trubal would again pop up out of nowhere and point his gun in the direction of Patch Lake. For I hadn't the vaguest notion of where it was.

Panic began to creep up on me, until I sternly told myself that it was ridiculous. Why, Times Square, the world's busiest corner, was only seventy miles away. But seventy miles in which direction?

What with the somber sky and the thick forest, I was practically pawing my way along in the dark, and now I thought of Trubal Elder as a warm and comforting friend.

Suddenly I broke into the open, just as the sky was split by an incredible blast of lightning that lit up the world for several long seconds. Ear-splitting thunder boomed out of the dark clouds, as if Satan were again assaulting Heaven, with Michael and the angels holding firm.

But the scene revealed starkly by the lightning was no less improbable. In the center of some ten or twenty cleared acres was a great, rambling manor house seemingly abandoned. At one end stood the biggest tree I had ever seen. Its trunk looked to be twenty feet across and the spread of its branches dwarfed that wing of the manor.

At the far end of the clearing a long, low building bordered a lawn now hip-high with wild grass. Several other outbuildings stood here and there, and on the

near side of the manor was a pond reflecting the sky like a black mirror.

I shivered.

Then, as though a great dam had broken overhead, the rain cascaded down. . . .

Two

"My God! You look like death warmed over!"

My loving husband! My one true soul-mate lazing comfortably in front of the fire with a scotch in one hand and a book in the other and a cheerful smile on his simpering face.

There was a mirror in one of the doors of the cabin, and I could see myself. I was a living horror; a thing dredged from the bottom of the lake after many days. Mud and water from head to foot. But my greatest need of the moment was something to throw. I picked up a boot by the door, hurled it, missed!

"You brute! Sitting here in slothful comfort!"

"Good lord, angel. There was no use both of us drowning. I waited here and kept the grog hot."

"While I almost died."

"Come to the fire. We'll strip those clothes off."

He took my hands in his, but only to keep my fingernails out of his eyes, and drew me toward the fire. "You look lovely all wet. Here, take a belt of this scotch and then I'll run you a hot tub. After a bath, we'll go out to dinner. I'm hungry."

"Out to dinner! You've lost your mind!"

He'd poured me a double scotch and now he was funneling it down my throat with the casual affection of a man coddling his favorite mare. I choked and gagged, and groped for something to collapse on.

"Not that chair, angel. You're all muddy. Just stand here on the hearth, and I'll get your clothes off."

"I was lost," I wailed. "Lost in the forest! Groping and sobbing for you! But did you come hunting for me? No! I could have died out there!"

He was busy peeling off my clothes. "Not a chance. You couldn't miss finding your way back. All you had to do was walk downhill until you came to the lake.

"I did come to the lake. On the other side!"

"Then all you had to do was walk around it."

"You're a beast!"

"And you're a living dream with nothing but your skin on. I'll pour your bath. I've been keeping a pot of water boiling hot." He kissed my shoulder and turned away.

"Well, are you going to leave me standing here shivering naked? You might get me a blanket or something!"

"All right. If you insist."

He brought me a blanket from the bed and then led me into the kitchen where a pot of water bubbled on the bottled-gas stove.

"What are you going to do now—boil me?"

"No, angel, there's cold water in the pump. I'll fill the tub."

A galvanized wash tub was sitting in the middle of the kitchen floor. "But it's not big enough!"

"We're a little short on conveniences out here, but we'll make do. You just park your bottom in the tub and let your legs hang out."

I looked ridiculous, but the touch of hot water was worth all my suffering, and with Dab on his knees, smelling of rich pipe tobacco, his hands touching

me, what had gone before was only a bad dream.

"Where did you go, angel?"

"I found an old cemetery—"

"A graveyard? Good lord!"

"And a weird old estate up by the mountain."

"You *do* get around. That's Malvern Manor. It's been cut off from the world for years. There's quite a story behind it."

"Lower down—on my back. Mmmm. That feels wonderful. A story?"

"It belonged to old Jim Malvern. He was one of the robber barons around the turn of the century. Stand up in the tub so I can get at your legs."

"I'm too comfortable. Wash them sticking out."

"The place itself goes way back. It was an Indian trading post when Manhattan was a handful of houses on the lower end of the island. Then during the early unpleasantness—does that feel good?"

"Oh, golly. After this bath I'll be almost ready to forgive you. You mean the American Revolution?"

"Uh-huh. The British and the rebels kept taking the place away from each other. The American spy Richard Bennington was hanged there."

"He had a wife—Abigail."

"Have you been reading up on American history?"

"No. I met a couple of people. By the way—are hostile old woodsmen allowed to go around with guns threatening people in this country?"

"A man threatened you?"

"Well, not exactly. He said it was going to rain."

"He was right. Must have been from Hog Hollow."

"From *where?*"

"Hog Hollow. You'll find some real characters up in those hills—"

"I already have."

"Come in by the fireplace. I'll dry you. Hog Hollow is a community, I guess you'd call it. A settlement that dates back some generations. The people intermarry and keep to themselves. They're the last of the rugged individualists—always in trouble with the game wardens and the truant officers. They live off the land."

"Living off the land that I saw wouldn't be very easy."

Dry and warm, I stood in front of the fire and brushed my hair.

Dab went to the window. "It's stopped raining—"

"It *would*. That whole storm was for my benefit."

"We'll go down to Sam Ludlow's tavern for dinner. You'll like Sam. He's a great cook."

"I hope so. I'm ready to eat that bathtub."

Dab watched me dress and gave every appearance of enjoying it. . . .

Sam Ludlow made my eyes pop. He had a girth that was a problem when he squeezed behind his bar. He could not have weighed an ounce under three hundred fifty pounds. He had an amazing baby-pink complexion and, like many fat people, he was voluble and had a sparkle about him.

He inspected me critically before rendering the verdict. "You don't even begin to rate her," he told Dab.

"That's what I've been maintaining from the start," I said.

Taking his good fortune for granted, Dab said, "Sam can tell you all about the Hog Hollow people. They come here to drink."

"At times," Sam replied. "Only at times. They make their own moon up there and use my straight bourbon for a chaser."

The inn was fascinating. It was over a hundred years old and looked as though it had never been swept out. Sam, an individualist himself, washed the dishes once a week. He stacked dirty glasses on the bar, always starting at the same end, and it was said that local alcoholics knew what day it was by how much room there was on the bar as the week wore on.

But he cooked like a man inspired. After the first mouthful of his pot roast and potato pancakes, you didn't care how dirty the place was.

Halfway through our dinner he eased himself into a chair at our table and said, "You were asking about Malvern. Sure, it goes back to the Revolution and way before."

"But it's completely cut off from the world. I found it by sheerest accident. How did it become so isolated?"

"That happened in 1910. Old Jim Malvern built the place in 1900 for the new wife he brought over from England. How about some more potato pancakes?"

"I couldn't eat another bite. You said he brought his wife from England?"

"That's right. Jim Malvern got to be a romantic old coot in his later years. He made Malvern Manor a real paradise, but it didn't help. His bride killed herself inside of a year. Hanged herself out the window.

Old Jim stayed on after that, puttering around in his garden and his riding stable. Then in 1910 they built a new reservoir that went right smack across the only road into Malvern Manor. He fought them in the courts for three years, but they beat him. He died a year later. He never got over his young wife's death, they say."

"How's for some coffee, Sam?" Dab said. "My brand new spouse hasn't learned to make it drinkable yet."

"If you happen to have some strychnine in the kitchen," I retorted, "I'll go out and try again."

Dab lounged back in his chair, stuffed and content. "There's an old back trail into Malvern, isn't there?"

"Sure—around the base of Rebel Hill. They—"

Dab sat up with a start. He stared at Sam. Then he turned to stare at me. It was as though he'd been slapped.

"Dab! What on earth!"

Sam turned his bright eyes my way. "Pagan, this boy's slipping. If you want to stay in the inn tonight—"

Dab slumped down again. "How about a little service, innkeeper? I'll have a little brandy with that coffee."

Sam went to get it, and Dab winked at me. But his eyes were vacant. Something had happened. "I wonder why nobody ever thought of it before?" he mumbled to himself.

"Darling, I fully realize that I'm only your wife, but—"

"And a finer, sweeter, more adorable wife a man never had. Let's hurry and finish our coffee. Then we can go home and make love."

Sam returned with the coffee and brandy, and I decided I should perhaps reassess his culinary skills. The coffee was a black, corroding brew.

Dab had lapsed into a preoccupied silence, and Sam got busy at the bar. I could see new rain splashing on the windows, and nothing more was said until we reached the door on the way out.

There I stopped suddenly and looked back at Sam Ludlow. "Who was Richard Bennington?" I asked, wanting to know more about him.

From behind the bar Sam regarded me thoughtfully, as though combing his list of current acquaintances for the name. Then he replied, "Oh, sure—that's the name of a minor historical figure—a spy the British hung when Malvern was a fort back during the Revolution. Are you interested in the Revolution?"

"No. I was just curious."

"They fought that war all over these parts. In fact, one wing of Malvern Manor is the original Fort Williams."

"Come on," Dab said, "it's starting to rain again."

Huddled beside him in the car, I felt depressed. Perhaps it was a reaction from my violent afternoon, I thought. Dab remained silent, and I felt no urge for conversation myself.

Back at the cottage, we stirred up the fire and sought to create a cheerful atmosphere. A little while later we got into bed, but there was no lovemaking.

Big talk, no action, I told myself resentfully as I lay against Dab and listened to his regular breathing; but I wasn't too resentful, actually. I was hardly in the mood.

I was thinking of Dee Elder, her golden hair, her sweet, vacant smile and her shapeless gray shift. My mind blurred, and somehow she got all mixed up with Abigail Bennington there in that brooding graveyard.

I dozed.

But then I awakened to a voice that was calling from somewhere out in the night:

"Pagan Cater—Paaagaaaan—Pagan Cater— come back."

I slipped out of bed and went to the window and looked out. There was nothing there—no one. Only the voice—the call—repeated; floating on the night wind; coming with the rain that washed against the glass. I shivered.

Time passed. . . .

A hand touched me.

"Pagan! What are you doing over here? Why did you get out of bed?"

I was kneeling, facing the window, and I looked up at Dab and shrank back against his thighs and took one of his hands to hold it close.

"There was a face at the window."

"That's ridiculous, honey. What idiot would snoop around in this weather?"

"The face of a girl with nothing under it. . . . I mean—no body—just the angry face with its mad eyes looking in at me."

He lifted me firmly and turned me around to peer at me. "Pagan—are you all right?" The burning logs flickered.

"You tell *me*. I don't know. It was a girl. She called to me—over and over again."

"Come to bed."

Back under the covers I clung to him, my body close to his.

"You must have had a bad dream."

"I had been asleep, but then I woke up when I heard the voice."

"Everything will be all right in the morning."

I lay silent for a few moments, shivering. I hadn't been cold at the window, but now I was chilled clear through.

"Dab."

"Yes?"

"Would you say I'm the sensitive type?"

"Good lord! What a question to ask at three o'clock in the morning!"

"I mean . . . would you consider me as being—well, neurotic?"

"You're about as neurotic as a brass band in a Fifth Avenue parade."

"Well . . . this afternoon . . . in that graveyard. There was something more there than just a lot of old tombstones. There was a presence . . . a mind. There was a consciousness."

"You had a rough day."

"I know things now that I wouldn't admit to myself then."

"What things?"—

"How it was. After Trubal Elder left—"

"Trubal Elder—who's he?"

"The man you said was from Hog Hollow."

"Oh, sure."

"Anyhow. I didn't go to Malvern Manor by chance. Not by accident, Dab. Something drew me. The voice I heard tonight was calling me. It was going to rain, and I wanted to turn around and come back here but I couldn't. I was drawn there against my will."

"That stupid hillbilly should have brought you home."

"Then when I got to Malvern Manor—saw it there all dark and waiting for me . . . I was never so frightened in my life. I just turned and ran and ran and ran. I think I even screamed. I was in total panic."

"You couldn't miss," he said drowsily. "All you had to do was keep going downhill and—"

"I know. And come to the lake. You said that. But why did I land on the far side?"

"You got mixed up."

Dab yawned, then kissed me. He pulled me close. "You're gorgeous, angel. Do you want to make love?"

"I don't think so."

He patted my shoulder understandingly. "Tomorrow we'll take the back trail and go back to Rebel Hill."

"I'll see you in the divorce court first. You'll never get me back to that place."

He nuzzled my cheek. "You're such a sexy little baggage—you drive a man crazy—"

I waited. Soon his breath was brushing evenly

across my face. Outside, the rain had stopped and there was silence.

Abigail Bennington had gone back to her grave.

I snuggled close to Dab and went to sleep. . . .

Three

JIM MALVERN'S young bride had hanged herself shortly after he brought her to Malvern Manor.

That thought was in my mind as I awakened. I was alone in bed and there were no sounds in the cottage. I got up and found a note scotch-taped to the fireplace:

Honey:

You were sleeping like the dead so I didn't wake you up. Figure we may stay here another week and I've got some things to check in the city. Drove down to Harmon. I'll take the train from there and be back before dark. If you get lonesome, why don't you hike over to Sam Ludlow's and make him buy you a drink? I'll have a surprise for you when I get back.

Love,

Dab.

I wished that he'd awakened me and taken me with him, but after I dressed and went outside, I felt better—less lonely.

It was a bright, blazing day. The sky was brilliant blue, and the sun was hot; I went to the bedroom window and tried to recreate the scene of the previous night. Pitch-black darkness. The rain beating down.

The wind crying through the trees with a kind of hopeless melody, like the lament of a helpless soul trapped somewhere between this world and the next—unable to leave, yet forbidden to stay.

Conjuring up this image was difficult. It was even hard to imagine the eerie, urgent voice that had called to me.

Dreams, Pagan. Restless dreams with no significance. Dangerous, unwholesome dreams. Take yourself in hand and live with the daylight. . . .

Ludlow Inn was three miles south, the dirt road heavily shaded and pleasant. Acting on sudden impulse, I slipped off my shoes and strode barefoot through the soft, thick dust. It was like walking on clouds. . . .

Why had she hung herself? Why would a girl with everything to live for destroy herself?

One wing of Malvern Manor is the original Fort Williams, I remembered Sam Ludlow mentioning. The original fort. And the Malverns had used it, I knew that. I also knew that Jim Malvern's wife had not hung herself from her own bedroom window. She had died in a room in that old fort; a room shaded by that huge oak tree.

I knew these things. But *how* did I know them? I had never read about Fort Williams or Malvern Manor. None of the people I'd met had furnished me with the details I was clearly aware of How?

The old fort still stood. I had to go there. I had to see it. What had been curiosity was now a compulsion.

I put my shoes back on and left the road. I was in

the grip of an emotion I had never before experienced; a sensuous urgency that made me understand the weaknesses of everyone who had ever turned recklessly away from logic and good sense to pursue some beckoning wraith.

Pagan—you're mad. Turn back, Pagan. Run! Run! Run!

I ran, but in the wrong direction. Up through the forest and over the rocks toward Rebel Hill. There were open places in the forest where thick branches blocked out the sun and made cool caves, and it was in these that I found Abigail Bennington again; as I'd found her in the graveyard and at my window the night before.

She vanished in the sun because she needed the darkness of the cool places—the cold darkness of her grave—the blackness of a night storm—the dimness of forest pathways.

There, her personality was strong and compelling and magnetic.

I struggled on and seemed to hear the sweet voice of Dee Elder singing again in the graveyard:

Satan slept at Rebel Hill,
When the Redcoats came.
He hung the brave young Richard,
And Cain was Satan's name.

There was a sob with every breath, and my throat was on fire, but it was a good pain because old Fort Williams still stood and the big oak tree still shaded it and Abigail Bennington could not rest in her grave.

Run, Pagan, run!

Brave young Richard. Abigail Bennington. Jim Malvern's bride.

Pagan Cater.

A name added. Why? I was not associated. Nothing that ever happened at Fort Williams or Malvern Manor could affect me.

So why had my name been added?

I sobbed and struggled on.

And broke into the open below Malvern Manor.

It was like coming home—coming fearfully back to a place I had never known. This contradiction hung like a great question mark in my mind. Home to a place I had never known. This was impossible. Had time been reversed for me?

I remembered a verse from an old poem by Rossetti; a poem I'd read as a child:

I have been here before
But when and where I cannot tell.
I know the grass beyond the door,
The sweet keen smell,
The sighing sounds, the lights around the shore.

Poetry had never interested me much, so it seemed significant that I remembered the verse. Also, another scrap from something Tolstoy wrote:

And I know it all, Oh, so well,
Though I never have been here before.
The roof there, far away yonder,
And the boy, and the wood, and the weir.

Malvern Manor was not the same as it had been during my first brief visit. It was, literally, as differ-

ent as day is from night. The great, dark buildings that had crouched like patient beasts under the black storm clouds were now sun-drenched and clear in detail. Malvern Manor was a sprawling rustic monstrosity, built of native logs—definitely more of a lodge than a manor. It consisted of a main two-story building with a wing of perhaps ten rooms reaching toward the lake.

Another wing, smaller, was out of balance with the rest of the building. It also had two floors, but they were lower and less spacious. There was a squat, muscular aspect to it, and its logs were thicker and obviously older.

Fort Williams. The original building that had known the blood and violence of the Revolution.

All the rest vanished for me, and the fort stood alone with the great oak tree looming at its end to hang like a giant green hand over its low-gabled roof.

I pushed up the slope and across the open area, the high grass pulling at my legs. I was breathing hard now but more from excitement than from the climb. There was a room in old Fort Williams, and Jim Malvern's young English bride had died in that room. I had to see it for myself.

But I was blocked. There was no way to get in There was a door, but it was bolted and nailed. It would have taken a battering ram to break through. Windows. Boarded up—covered with thick planks held in place with rusted spikes.

There had to be another entrance. Through the lodge. Of course! I ran around the building and found the big main door hanging by one hinge.

The interior was dark and musty, but I was conscious of little around me, noting only the corridor that led to the old Fort Williams wing. I followed it—to a dead-end: the corridor was abruptly walled off with more thick planks; rough-hewn slabs with the bark still on them.

Fear overshadowed my wrenching disappointment, for I suddenly began to wonder what was happening to me.

I think, up to that moment, I had refused to really *believe*. I had attributed the bizarre happenings to a high imagination I had never known; to the new world and the new life I'd so suddenly found in marriage to Dabney. I'd pondered the reactions of the nervous bride and all the rest of it. I'd refused to believe because I had not wanted to.

But now I knew the truth. There *was* a power here. There was an evil, compelling personality, and it had asserted itself the moment I'd laid eyes on that ancient graveyard.

There was a malevolent consciousness, capable of entering my mind to form thoughts and assert its power. What it wished for me I wished for myself, and its wishes had led toward this barricaded wing and the hidden room inside.

I whimpered and sank to my knees while the undead presence of Abigail Bennington gloated and crooned soundless hatred in my mind.

And yet that description was not entirely accurate. For all the descriptive terms we have are geared to things we know: material things and ideas associated with them. Thus, whoever is allowed a glimpse be-

yond, sees only the incomparable; a world devoid of all familiar substance; a desolate world where hopelessness and despair cling, like cosmic dust, to anything of substance.

These things, I was sure, were not meant to be And yet they *were*. Somehow, at times, the crack appears in the wall of reality and that which we try to keep out seeps in.

All this went through my mind in a quick jumble of realization, but such abstractions did not predominate. They were merely a mental backdrop for what lay in the forefront; a compulsive yearning to go through those barricades—and a terrible fear of what I would find there.

Now as I gasped for breath in the stifling narrowness of the corridor—the very air seemed to be pushed out by the gloating consciousness that was crowded in there with me—I think I momentarily blacked out. . . .

Then I found myself in the fort—in the room. Not as it would be now . . . but as it had been then . . . long ago . . . when the Redcoats came.

And all at once my fear was gone, driven out by the fascination of this strange new place.

It was a small bedroom. . . .

The bed was crude, as was the chair, and the comforter on the bed had many colors. The window gave onto a scene of old activity, confirming my belief that nothing is ever lost; that all things done can never be undone; that all things go on forever, and each thing causes another thing in an infinite pattern of things,

each depending on the thing that came before it but each thing remaining forever because time is only an illusion.

Through the window I saw a large stockade surrounded by a high wall of pointed stakes. In a far corner a squad of British regulars was drilling under the hot sun, their long, bayoneted rifles clumsy in their hands. Somewhere a drum was rolling out a beat. On the grass under a tree close to the window was a table around which men sat, their white-powdered wigs and jackets removed, their attention focused on the map they were studying. There was movement and color and activity in the square with people coming and going, bronzed Indians squatting in groups, and tanned and leathered woodsmen sprawling at ease in the shade of he wall.

The scene was both reality and unreality—real in that it was there, but unreal in that it slipped the cogs of time and moved quickly into night, with fires burning and turning into dead embers and the sun giving birth to a new day.

With dawn came renewed activity. There was a somber rolling of drums and the quick, high-pitched cry of a woman.

The officers who had been studying the map appeared again, but the table was gone. The light of morning showed them in full dress uniforms, befitting the solemn occasion about to take place.

As Sunrise approached, a batallion of soldiers marched out and maneuvered into a bank of red and white across one end of the stockade. Now other soldiers came, one on either side of a girl whom they brought to a place near the tree and to the left of the

grouped, silent officers of His Majesty's Colonial Army. The girl wore a white blouse and a voluminous brown skirt, and there was an emptiness in her young face—a look of dazed incomprehension.

The drum-roll grew louder, and a squad of Redcoats marched toward a small log hut near the stockade wall. They formed a square, and the door of the hut opened. A young man walked out. He wore knee breeches and a loose white shirt. His hair was in a braid at the nape of his neck.

He took his place in the center of the square, and the soldiers marched him toward the tree by the window, where a small, portable platform had been positioned under a hangman's noose that dangled from a limb.

The young man's walk was erect and proud. As he passed the girl, he turned to her and smiled, then mouthed something with his lips. Then he marched on.

There was little ceremony. The young man, his hands tied behind his back, stood for a few moments before an officer who stepped from the group and read a short death-sentence. As the officer remained where he was, the young man mounted the makeshift scaffold.

And I knew the officer's name was Cain.

The sun had risen now, and with it came a breeze. As the hangman reached for the rope, a sudden gust whipped it away. He reached again. Again the wind snatched it away, and a grim little game was played for a few moments while the prisoner waited, paying no attention whatever.

Finally the rope was put around Richard Benning-

ton's neck, and the hangman left the scaffold. Three soldiers pulled the platform from under the young man's feet, and he dropped to within a foot of the ground. . . .

. . . I lay with my cheek against the rough bark of the log barricade, and someone was singing:

Satan slept at Rebel Hill,
When the Redcoats came.
He hung the brave young Richard,
And Cain was Satan's name.

I opened my eyes. The aimless, lilting voice came closer, there were light footsteps, and the inquiring face of Dee Elder looked down at me.

"Are you sick?"

Aside from being embarrassed and exhaused, I was quite all right. The Presence was gone. "Is that the only song you ever sing?"

The child's mentality was not geared to surprise. She took all things as they came and accepted every situation as commonplace.

"It's my favorite song. It has lots of verses."

"What are you doing here?"

"Oh, I come here a lot. I like it. It's quiet."

"You've run away from your grandfather again."

"He went to town. Petey was arrested for hunting. He shot a deer. Every time anybody from Hog Hollow gets arrested, Grandfather Trubal goes to town and gets them out. You're all dirty."

We'd left the lodge and were outside in the blessed

daylight, and Dee was brushing cobwebs from my skirt.

"Never mind. I'll send it to the cleaners." I smiled at her, ashamed of my brusqueness. Then, seeking to adjust to the level at which she seemed to function, I asked, "Have you seen Abigail lately?"

"Abigail is angry."

"What is she angry about?"

"You, I think. What did you do to make her angry?"

"Nothing that I'm aware of. Didn't she tell you?"

"No."

The child's simple, casual attitude was chilling; her innocent acceptance of the occult. And I felt guilty taking advantage of it.

"When did you first meet Abigail?"

"A long time ago. I was three or five or seven, I don't know. But I went to the graveyard because it's so quiet and peaceful there. And she talked to me."

"What does she look like?"

Dee raised blank eyes. "Look like? I don't know. When you're dead you don't look like anything. I saw a picture of her in one of Grandfather's old books. But she doesn't look like that."

"Do you ever see anyone else in the graveyard?"

"There are others, but I don't see them."

"Abigail was Richard's wife, wasn't she?"

Dee looked at me as though I'd said something improper. It was the first disruption of her placid calm I had yet seen.

"Abigail *is* Richard's wife!"

"I'm sorry. Is Richard in the graveyard?"

"He's buried there, but he's gone. That's why Abigail is so sad most of the time."

"Is she ever happy?"

"She can't be. She wants to go to Richard, but the tree stands in her way."

"What tree?"

"Why, that tree. The Hanging Oak. Don't you *know?*"

"I'm afraid not. But I haven't been here very long."

"Abigail loves Richard, but she loves the tree too. And as long as she loves the tree, she can't go to Richard."

I looked up at the towering oak and for a moment it seemed to possess a living consciousness. The murmur of the breeze in its great spreading branches was a voice speaking to me.

"The tree is bad," Dee said.

"But it's such a gorgeous, massive thing."

Dee's sweet, upturned face had a magnetism of its own. Innocence perhaps. It was a beautiful face and all my previous judgments as to sanity and insanity, stupidity and brilliance . . . faded into oblivion.

"The tree has bad wood."

"Bad wood? What do you mean?"

She couldn't conceive my not understanding. She'd made a simple statement. "Bad wood. Some wood is good. Other wood is bad."

Although our conversation appeared to border on the moronic, I didn't care. There was something here I *had* to understand; something this child could tell me.

"The wood in the tree is bad," I agreed. "Is there any good wood at Malvern Manor?"

"The fort is not good. People were killed and there was blood. But once there was a little church, and that wood was very good."

I tried to recall something I had read and forgotten, or that someone had told me. But my memory failed. "Why does Abigail hate me?"

"I don't know, but she hates you the same way she hates Penelope. Sometimes Penelope cries and Abigail floats on the wet grass and dances."

I felt a chill. "Who is Penelope?" But I knew the answer even before Dee replied.

"She is Jim Malvern's wife."

I hadn't known her name, and when Dee told me, the Hanging Oak's leaves rustled as if reacting to her words.

I put my arm around Dee's slim shoulders and walked down the slope away from the lodge and Rebel Mountain. "In that song you sing, Dee, you say that Satan's name is Cain. What does that mean?"

"The Redcoat colonel who sentenced young Richard to death. Hs name was Cain. I think the song means that Colonel Cain was evil when he hung young Richard."

A surge of emotion welled inside me. I turned suddenly and drew Dee into my arms. "Darling! You're such a lovely little girl! You're pretty and sweet and wonderful. Do you ever go to the movies or do the things other girls do?"

My impulsive gesture could have frightened her but it did not. She looked up at me in gentle wonder. "What do other girls do?"

"Oh, they play and laugh. And they have dolls. Did you ever have a doll?"

"No."

Perhaps she was a little old. But how old was she, really? "Would you like one?"

"I think so."

"Then I'll buy one for you. The very next time I go to town."

"I'd like that."

"Hadn't you better be getting home now? Your grandfather will come hunting for you."

She moved away. "I'll go up the mountain. I want to pick some berries on the way for Grandfather Trubal's supper."

I watched her as she left—floating through the high grass in her shapeless gray shift. Then she was gone, leaving a strange, eerie emptiness.

Had she really been there? Had I actually seen her? Or was she some sort of a phantom embodiment of all the unreal things that were closing about me?

It was growing late and the sun was beginning to go down. The thought of being alone at Malvern Manor frightened me. I did not want to be alone there after sundown.

Malvern Manor. The place of the abominable tree and the old fort with all its evil hidden behind boarded windows and blocked corridors. I plunged into the forest, leaving the God-Forsaken place to its apparent loneliness. . . .

Four

I DIDN'T REALIZE, when I got back to Patch Lake, how tight and raw my nerves had become. It was with a sense of gratitude that I entered the primitive little cottage and found familiar things close to me again; our suitcases stacked by the wall; the bed we slept in; a sport shirt of Dab's thrown carelessly over a chair.

We'd brought a bottle of scotch with us, and I poured a healthy "belt," as Dab would have called it. I wasn't much of a drinker and had always found the taste of raw loquor nauseating. But I downed the scotch like water and was hardly conscious of it. That was probably what put the edge on my mood; the sharp edge Dab found when he got home. His smile and quick kiss left me cold.

"Where have you been?" He glanced toward the fireplace. "I left a note."

"I read it. Why didn't you wake me up?"

"I wanted you to sleep, honey."

"Was that it, or didn't you want to be bothered with me?"

"Pagan! For heaven's sake!"

"What was this mysterious business in New York?"

He grinned. "It's my surprise. I thought of it last night."

"I was aware that you thought of something—

when we were having dinner at Sam Ludlow's. But you kept it to yourself."

"Pagan—what's got into you?"

"I'll tell you what's got into me. I'm tired of being treated more like an afterthought than a wife. I'm tired of being left alone in this miserable way-station to nowhere while you come and go as you please."

He shook his head as if unable to understand anyone being so unreasonable. And indeed he had grounds. But this was not my day to be reasonable.

"I went to New York to see about some business."

"What kind of business?"

"We're going to buy Malvern Manor. We're going to make a ski lodge out of it."

It was as though he'd thrown a pail of ice water into my face.

"I'll see you in the divorce court first!"

My words were close to those we used so often in bantering affection. But this was different. I saw myself standing there. I heard myself shrieking like a fishwife and I did not want it to be that way at all. I wanted to rush into his arms and tell him what had happened—that the spirits of the dead had had me by the throat; or that I was going out of my mind. But I couldn't.

His expression was one of doubt. Had I meant it the way it had sounded? Was I just being momentarily difficult, or was I as profoundly disturbed as my words and manner indicated?

"Pagan—that was my surprise . . ."

I hated him for hiding behind the "hurt little boy" attitude. Was he so thick-headed as to imagine I could be cajoled out of justified anger?

"Your *surprise!* Well, I've got a surprise for you. You won't get me anywhere near that place! And I'll have nothing to do with your crazy schemes. I think maybe your brothers are right. You don't know what to do with money. A ski-lodge at Malvern Manor indeed! Did you talk to your brother about it?"

He was frosting over slowly. Soon he would be in a complete deepfreeze. "Yes, I talked to Mark. I need the six thousand of mine he's holding."

"And what did he think of your *surprise?*"

"He didn't exactly push the money across the desk."

"He thought it was crazy, didn't he?"

"His reaction gave some indication of that," Dab said stiffly.

"I can imagine. When do you plan to open the place?"

"I thought we could go up there tomorrow and look over the layout."

"Now it's *we.* I wasn't important enough to go to New York with you. . . . What would my job be? Clearing brush? Mowing the lawn?" I hated myself. I was sick inside. I was aghast at what I was doing to him but I couldn't stop.

Dab wasn't one to explode in anger. He didn't work that way. In a quick perceptive moment I saw that he and Dee Elder had a lot in common. A kind of innocence that came from a complete absence of hostility toward anyone or anything on this earth. Dab's armour against the world was a complete trust in it and a belief in its better side.

He should never have married me.

Dab's face was a stiff, uncomprehending mask,

remote, bewildered. "Making a ski lodge out of Malvern Manor looked like a good project to me."

"Have you seen it? Have you bothered to look at it?"

"Not yet. I—"

"*I have.* I was there. You can't sell skiing to people if they can't reach the premises."

"It's accessible from around Rebel Hill. There is a path—"

"For mountain goats, no doubt. But that's only one of the drawbacks. If you put fifty men to work twenty-four hours a day for the whole summer the place might begin to look habitable. Your six thousand dollars—"

"There is more money available."

He'd grown so remote. I'd pushed him so far away I knew he would never come back and that frightened me even more than what I was doing to him. But I couldn't reach out. "Did you speak to the First National Bank?"

"I have my teddy bear."

It was my turn to stare. "This is no time to be funny . . ." I threw up my hands in dismay.

Dab turned toward the door. He could have been a vacuum cleaner salesman rebuffed by the lady of the house. "I'm going over to Sam Ludlow's. If you get hungry and want dinner, you might drop around."

And he left as abruptly as he'd entered. . . .

The tears came as he drove away; a wild hysteria of weeping that did me some good because in a short time I was exhausted and dropped off to sleep.

I awakened as dusk was falling and was immediately overcome by a terrible feeling of loneliness.

The cottage was dead silent. Even the leaves—a perpetual summer murmur at Patch Lake—were still. It was as though the world had stopped.

He didn't come back, I thought. He should have gone a little way down the road and then realized I didn't mean a word of it. Then he should have come back. It had been our first quarrel. But also, possibly, the last.

I'd been lying across the bed and I lifted myself and sat up and looked out the window. There was a faint sound and I automatically tightened. I turned my head for the barest few moments to glance around the room. When I turned my eyes back, there was a figure standing in the window.

My scream triggered a quick movement outside; then the face of Trubal Elder peered in.

"Is anything wrong?"

"No. You startled me."

There was a frown of disapproval on his thin, lantern-jawed face; disapproval, perhaps of females who screamed for no reason. "I came from out back. I was heading around toward your front door.

I met him there and opened the screen, determined to treat him with more courtesy than he'd accorded me during our first meeting. "Won't you come in?"

He shook his head as he changed his rifle from the crook of one arm to the other. "No thanks. I dropped around because I heard your husband wanted to see me." I must have looked quite mystified because he added, "I got the word from Sam Ludlow down at the inn."

I didn't contradict him but I wondered when Dab could have contacted Sam. I'd been with him the

whole time during dinner at the inn, and he'd said nothing about wanting to see Trubal Elder. Perhaps he'd spoken to Sam on the way to the city that morning. But what did he want of Trubal?

"My husband is at the inn now."

"Hmmm. Passed by there around five o'clock myself."

"He must have gotten there a short time later."

Trubal uncrooked his rifle and leaned on it, undecided as to what to do. "Any idea of what your man wanted?"

"I'm afraid not."

The night was lowering swiftly and I suddenly realized I didn't want to be alone. Even this surly old hillbilly was a buffer against the deep shadows. There were serviceable Coleman lamps inside, but human companionship was better.

"If you would care to sit down for a few minutes, Dabney will probably be home."

He scowled as he pondered the invitation, then lowered himself into the rustic chair beside the door. "I'll sit for a spell. May save a trip later."

I sat down in a chair opposite him, and silence prevailed once more as he made no attempt at conversation. I waited also, wondering which of us would surrender first.

I did. Convinced that he was prepared to sit in silence for the rest of the evening, I said, "The weather was beautiful today."

"It's been a little dry. We need more rain."

"After that storm?"

"That kind of water runs off pretty fast. We need three or four days of slow, steady rain."

I thought of how dismal that would be in these lonely hills. "I understand you come from Hog Hollow." I made the comment even though the very name sounded like an insult.

He did not take it as such, however. "Over the other side of Rebel Hill. Good deer country around there. Some estates back beyond. The deer come around for the apples."

"That must annoy the estate owners."

"It does. Gives us good hunting. They turn away when we drop a buck, and they don't tell the wardens."

"I was out hiking today. I met Dee. She's a sweet child."

"A little backward. Too much inbreeding in the line."

His frankness would have been refreshing under less formal circumstances, I thought, but now it just missed being offensive.

But his candor continued. "She's the child of a boy and his first cousin. No point in trying to discourage it, though."

"Why not?" There was a waxing moon, and his face, half in shadow and half in faint light, appeared vaguely Lincolnesque. If my question surprised him, he gave no sign.

"It's the way they live. They belong where they are. And there they'll stay until progress overruns them."

"You're referring to the Hog Hollow people in general?"

"The Hog Hollowers and other communities about."

"There are other such communities?" I didn't care whether my inquiries were patronizing or not. I was highly curious. And Trubal Elder didn't seem to care either.

"Several others. The Penders at Grass Lake. The blind Bartons at Ridge Run."

"The blind Bartons?"

"A classic example of inbreeding weakness. The Barton clan has been born blind for three generations now."

I gasped. "And it's permitted?"

"Who's to stop it?"

"I'd think they'd stop it themselves."

"No law says you can't have children. They get around all right. They make out."

"The state must have to help."

"It does. Gives the welfare people something to do."

"Dee is your granddaughter?"

"No relation. I gave her my name. I give quite a few of them my name."

I was really confused. "You're not related?"

"Not to any of them. They're just my people."

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand."

"It's simple enough. I took over at Hog Hollow. I keep them self-supporting."

"You're not a native New Yorker?"

"I'm not a native anything. Been all over the country. Started roaming after I got my Ph.D. Came onto Hog Hollow fifteen years ago. Stayed there."

"Then you're—everybody's grandfather?"

"You might put it that way."

"What do you have your degree in?"

"Philosophy. Did a little postgraduate work at M.I.T.—in electronics. Didn't care for it. Liked languages, though. Made a living translating for awhile. Gave it up later."

"How many languages—?"

"Around fifteen. They come easily. All the romance. The slavic tongues. A few Chinese dialects."

The man was amazing—not only his background, but the manner in which he referred to it; completely casual and with a certain weariness, as though having a Ph.d. and knowing fifteen languages was the minimum basic requirement for enrolling in the human race. A few things began to fall into place. Among them, Dee Elder's strange references that afternoon.

"I was wondering about Dee. You called her backward. Are you sure this backwardness doesn't come from the seclusion? The isolation?"

"Her I.Q., by normal standards, is very low. It's the breeding. Certain capacities just aren't there. But there are capacities in other directions. There's a purity in Dee that is the stuff of saints; a compulsive objectivity. Joan of Arc had it. And Sainte Therese. But few others. Many of the saints were phonies. Highly emotionalized fanatics."

"Dee said something today that intrigued me. She said that the wood in that big oak tree is *bad* wood. That in other cases, in a church for instance, the wood is different. It is good wood. That must have been something you told her."

"No, she told me. I verified it as being a supported philosophical theory. But there's more to it than that

—more theory, that is. The point is: it's a truth she understands perfectly in her *low* I.Q. mind. I've got a 158 I.Q. But I can't grasp it."

He was not running down the I.Q. measuring system so much as explaining its inadequacy in certain cases.

"You say you verified it."

"As a previously presented theory, yes. In a book called *Tertium Organum,* Ouspensky, the Russian, said the wood of a cross and the wood of a hangman's gibbet are different after it has been put to those uses —even if the wood came from the same tree. But Dee never read Ouspensky. Yet she puts forth the same idea."

"That's pretty much over my head. But do you try to break Dee away from her occult associations?"

"Why should I?"

I wasn't prepared for quite so abrupt a challenge. "Well—I don't quite know—but it seems unhealthy. Her imaginary relationship with the dead—with Abigail Bennington."

"Imaginary?"

"You mean you believe the conscious spirit of a girl dead two hundred years still exists?"

The moon revealed Trubal Elder's full face now, bringing his features into sharper contrast. His eyes were submerged in two dark pools, but I saw a glow in them as he fixed them upon me."

"You know Abigail is still in that graveyard, don't you?" He asked the question with the faintest touch of contempt, as if he sensed a cowardly evasion in my words.

"I know no such thing."

"Then what are you afraid of?"

I felt as though he had stripped me naked. "Afraid? Why should I be—? Yes, I suppose I am afraid. But not of non-existent spirits. Only of myself."

"That doesn't make much sense. Why should you be afraid of yourself?"

"Something about this country frightens me."

"An old graveyard up in the hills, maybe?"

"At least that seems to have touched it off."

There were mocking overtones in his voice now. "But if there are nothing but old bones and worn headstones there, why should anything be touched off in you? Are you neurotic? Do you have morbid preoccupations?"

I'd ceased marveling at questions such as this from a man I'd mistakenly thought of as an illiterate backwoodsman. "No. I'm a realist. I'm a perfectly normal materialist."

"Then you're in fine shape. What are you fussing about?"

My fists were doubled in anger. "You're—you're not a very sympathetic person!"

"Why should I be? What is there to sympathize with?"

"Are you telling me that the conscious, evil spirit of Abigail Bennington still exists?"

Slowly, he came to his feet and squinted up at the moon. "Guess your husband won't be along for awhile."

"Answer me!"

"I'm not telling you anything. Let your husband

know I was here, will you? If he wants me right away, he can drop over to Hog Hollow. Otherwise, I'll bump into him someplace."

He was leaving me alone there in the darkness. I was terribly frightened, but I still had some pride left. I could not bring myself to ask him to stay. In fact, I was proud to the point of recklessness, because when he asked, "Do you want to light the lamps before I go?" I managed a small laugh. "Do I look like a child afraid of the dark?"

He took a few steps, then turned; while his face was in deep shadow, I knew he was studying me. "I'll tell you this. If the spirit of Abigail Bennington *is* still around, she didn't pick your name out of some occult hat. She had a reason."

"What would you suggest I do?" The pride was suddenly gone. My voice was small as I spoke.

"I'd suggest you find out the reason."

"How can I do that?"

"They go out for local lore over at Chilton. Old families. Heritage conscious. And they have a nice little library. You might do some reading."

Then he was gone. And the grotesque aspect struck me; a Ph.D. who spoke fifteen languages slipping silently off into dark forests with the surefootedness of a scout from Cooper's *Leather-Stocking Tales.* It was ridiculous.

I remained where I was for a while, telling myself that it was cool and pleasant and that I enjoyed sitting there; until I couldn't swallow the lie any longer and admitted the truth: I was frightened.

The wood of a cross and the wood of a gibbet are different. And the atmosphere around the cottage

was not the same as when Trubal Elder and I had carried on our remarkable conversation. I sensed the change as readily as I could sense a sudden change in the weather.

It was as though a Presence had been waiting for him to leave, biding its time, knowing it could not manifest itself while he was there. Yes, I could feel its dampness on the back of my neck . . . the vengeful, occult Presence of Abigail Bennington, permeating the air, filling the silence, brooding over the cottage.

And I was alone.

I had to light the lamp. The light would protect me. I knew I should have let Trubal Elder do it.

But it was too late now. I had to get up from my chair and go into the pitch-dark cottage and find the matches and the lamp and—

I straightened my spine and lifted my shoulders. It would not be so difficult. I was really being a victim of my own foolishness.

"I'm not afraid of you, Abigail Bennington."

It was different now. Stronger. Definitely more potent. As though she had found strength and sustenance; as though my fear and weakness were food for her dark spirit.

There was laughter. *Get up and light the lamp, Pagan Cater.*

Not a voice. Only a reaching from the silence. But strong, so very strong, pushing against my mind.

"I can light the lamp."

Light the lamp, Pagan Cater.

"Why do you hate me?"

Light the lamp. It was a taunt. It went with the

mad face and the eyes I'd seen through the rain-washed window.

"I'm not afraid of you."

Light the lamp.

I moved toward the door. The moon was now cloud-covered but the door jamb was a phantom line. I found it and opened the screen and went inside.

She was silent . . . watching.

Satan slept at Rebel Hill,
When the Redcoats came.
He hung the brave young Richard
And Cain was Satan's name.

The verse came in the sweet, child-voice of Dee Elder, but now there was a terrible malevolent glee in it. Not Dee Elder. A playback somehow imposed upon my ears out of my own memory. But why?

"I was not responsible for—"

The closest lamp stood on the table about four feet from the door. I felt along the wall and my fingers were scant inches from it. But before they touched it, the lamp crashed to the floor.

There was laughter.

I steeled myself against panic. It was only my imagination, I told myself. I had touched the lamp. Lamps do not fall from tables unless they are pushed.

Light the lamp, Pagan Cater.

"Damn you! Leave me alone."

My imagination was running wild now because I felt a cold breath across my face, and it was thick with the stench of the grave.

Pagan! Pagan! Control yourself! You can't go to

pieces! There is no one here! You are alone. Light the lamp and find a book and read until Dab comes home. Turn your mind from this insanity!

Sternly instructing myself thus, I moved toward the fireplace; reaching; ignoring the perspiration that ran down my back. I seized a poker and stirred the fire. Yellow flame burst from the log in the fireplace, and I saw her face as I had seen it in the window. But more provocatively evil now. And only for the barest instant. Only as long as fevered imagination could hold such a ridiculous vision; such a false image.

All imagination.

I reached for the lamp on the stone shelf and before I could touch it, it fell to the floor with a crash. I screamed as her laughter filled the cottage.

In blind panic I turned and rushed toward the door. The forest would be sanctuary. Any place beyond this crushing room would be sanctuary.

I tripped and fell headlong. Still screaming, I rolled over on my back to fight off the hovering evil, and again there was the stench of the dead.

My screams were sobs now as I came to my knees and crawled toward the door; crawled until I touched a wall and knew I'd gone in the wrong direction. I was trapped in a corner.

The room is in the old fort, Pagan Cater.

Not a voice, nothing but what was already in my own mind. I struggled to my feet and tipped over the table by the bedroom door. But it was a healthy crash. I knew, because I could feel the sharp edge against my forehead. I'd hit the table myself. No ghost-hands had pushed it beyond my grasp.

I got to my feet and spoke to myself so that I could hear my own voice and make it drown out the other.

"This is nonsense. I will go outside and wait for Dab to come home." The sound was a croak deep in my throat. But . . . we had a fight, my thoughts responded. . . . He may not come. . . . He may not come at all. . . .

The tree is waiting, Pagan Cater.

Could that have been in my mind? Why would I *think* such words? What had I to do with a tree?

Laughter.

Screaming in panic, I lunged and fell over a chair. I went down with stunning force and fainted.

But unconsciousness was not complete. In the darkness of my inert mind, I knew she was still there.

Watching . . .

Gloating . . .

Five

"PAGAN! Tell me! For God's sake! Tell me what happened."

I awoke to a pleading voice and a frightened face close to mine. The single remaining lamp was lit. Early dawn was erasing the outer darkness.

Dab had come back.

I lifted my arms and clung to him. "Oh, darling . . . I'm so sorry. I was such a bitch! But I didn't mean it. I'll do whatever you say—go wherever you go!".

"It was my fault. Every word you said was right. But what happened? Who wrecked the house?"

"I did. It's easier than you think, darling—in the dark. You fall over one thing. Then another. Pretty soon you've got a wreck on your hands."

"I ought to be horsewhipped. I went away and left you!"

"Of course you should darling—for marrying such a zany female."

He picked me up and stood scowling into my face. "Don't say that. Don't ever say it again. I've just got to learn to stop living selfishly. I've been selfish all my life."

I snuggled contentedly in his arms. My world hadn't fallen to pieces after all. We were together again. We would build a ski lodge and make a million

dollars and have children and stay in love forever.

The emotional crest we'd created was substantial enough to hold together until we were in bed, close in each other's arms, with the dawn ushering in a new day.

We slept all through the morning . . .

I awoke first, and to say that I was a completely new person was no exaggeration. Everything not only looked different, it was different.

All the nonsense had vanished; gone so completely I was not even interested in why it had happened. My fantasies about some preposterous ghost named Abigail Bennington; my distortion of a backward girl's personality into something occult; my wonder over a lazy recluse who happened to have a knack for languages and had probably stayed in school and gotten a Ph.d. All gone. Those stupid reactions and my crazy preoccupation with certain local history—gone.

Perhaps it had all come about from an urge to become a part of Dab's native land too swiftly. I'd taken on more than I could digest. The explanation was warmly satisfying.

Gay as a child, brave in the safety of daylight, I slid out from under the covers and stood on my hands and knees over Dab.

"You—lazy bones."

He opened sleepy eyes.

"I'm naked. Does that suggest anything?"

His arm came out to grab me, but I slipped away and reached for my robe. "It's high noon. Love would

be scandalous. And you do it so badly without your coffee."

"Come here, witch."

I went into the kitchen, and when I came back with the coffee, he was sitting up in bed yawning.

"Now—tell me everything. Your great plan. How it came about. Where it will go."

"I got the idea—"

"I know—at Sam Ludlow's."

"Uh-huh. A sudden burst of genius and I saw it all. A natural—"

"I know. A made-to-order lodge. A ski mountain right beside it."

"So I went to New York—"

"I know—and talked to Mark. And he thought it was a silly idea."

He riveted me with his glare. "Will you shut up and let me tell it?"

"Yes, but first, Trubal Elder was here last night. He said you wanted to see him. What do you want to see him about?"

"Help—labor. There's a lot of work to be done."

"And labor has to be paid for. Keep talking."

"Mark balked like a mule, but he gave me my six thousand."

"But not his blessing."

"Hardly."

"But if it's a success, he'll be the first to congratulate you."

"Sure. Mark's okay. I guess he's got reason to feel a little discouraged. And I don't think he sees the idea as altogether crazy."

"He just doesn't think you'll carry through. He thinks you'll remember something you forgot to do in Hong Kong."

"How did you know?"

"I'm perceptive. But now tell me how we're going to get that fine, spanking lodge going on six thousand dollars when it will cost more than that just to get a road in, my love."

"Ah—but we won't need a road."

"Oh. We're going to buy a fleet of helicopters. Why didn't I think of that?"

"The trail leads in from around Rebel Mountain. We'll clear it and put a small station down by the highway. Our clientele—they'll come by appointment of course—will be met there. They can change their clothes. Then they'll be guided in. It will add exclusiveness and glamour to the place."

"And save scads of money—"

"The lodge, when we get it fixed up, will make the pages of every snob magazine in the country. We couldn't keep from getting rich even if we wanted to."

"Of course we'll be rich, lover, but there's one little thing I don't quite understand. Where's the money coming from to make snob-magazine bait out of our beautiful ski lodge? We'll need a small army just to get that high grass down. And armies like to get paid. Or do you have friends stupid enough to be worked to death for beer and sandwiches?"

"I think you're laughing at me," Dab grinned.

"Oh, no, darling! Never! I'll learn to eat grass if it will help."

He kissed me and it tasted wonderful. Then he sobered. "It's not a hair-brained scheme at all, Pagan. I know I have a bad reputation with my family. But they're not very perceptive, or they'd see this as my move toward settling down and making something of myself."

"*I* see it, darling, so what do we care about anybody else?"

That earned another kiss; an even longer one.

"You know I believe in you, heart and soul, darling, but will you *please* tell me where the extra money is going to come from? Six thousand dollars isn't much when—"

"But I have Ludwig."

Again the ridiculous allusion to that even more ridiculous teddy bear. I closed my eyes to show that I was tapping my last reservoir of patience.

"I never really told you about Ludgwig, did I?"

"No, I'm afraid you never did."

"I've had him since I was sixteen years old."

"You never mentioned that. I thought you'd had him since you were a tot." A wild, disloyal thought struck me. Had my beloved still been a child at sixteen? I could accept his lugging a battered toy to the ends of the earth and back—sentimentality was understandable. But a case of arrested development was not. I dismissed the thought with a chuckle. There had to be a logical explanation.

"I guess I was a little ashamed to explain it."

"Tell me, Dab. I'll understand."

"So few people understood Aunt Maggie. They all thought she was off her trolley. In fact, the courts

took control of Uncle Fred's fortune out of her hands—called her incompetent. That wasn't true, though. She was just eccentric."

"What did Aunt Maggie have to do with Ludwig?"

"She gave him to me. And when she did, I had to make a very solemn promise that I would never open him until the right time came. But she left it to me to decide the right time. She said I would know."

"She made you promise not to *open* Ludwig?"

"Yes. But the time has come. We'll open him now."

As I watched, dazed, Dab went to his suitcase and came back with the blue teddy bear. It was indeed a miserable looking piece of refuse. One of its button eyes was gone, an ear hung by a thread, and it was practically bald—this last from Dab's absentminded habit of rubbing it between its ears with his thumb, as though it were some sort of luck piece.

Now, Dab carefully broke the thread that held the right arm to the body. Removing the arm, he reached inside with two fingers and drew out a tightly wrapped cylinder of paper. Fascinating. Green.

The paper had been tightly furled for so long, he had difficulty unrolling and counting the crisp, new thousand-dollar bills.

"Twenty thousand," Dab said. "Sixteen grand will make enough improvement in the lodge to interest business capital. It will be a cinch to get a loan if we need more."

"Now let me understand this completely. Your Aunt Maggie gave you the teddy bear with twenty thousand dollars hidden inside, when you were sixteen years old."

"Yes. She was a grand old lady. They were in the process of impounding her fortune at the time, and this was a little pin money she had lying around. If she'd given it to me openly, it would have gone under Mark's control. Aunt Maggie hated sensible, well-regulated people. And she didn't want me to have to beg for my own money. Those were her words. She had faith in me, so she gave me Ludwig and we made the pact—that I wouldn't open him until I *knew* the right time had come."

I was left almost speechless. "She must have been a fabulous person."

"She was wonderful but—well, I guess they were right in a sense. Left to herself, she would have given all her money away."

"But it was her money to do with as she pleased, wasn't it?"

"Well, yes—and no." He frowned and I ran the tip of my finger along the lines in his forehead, trying to flatten them out. "Aunt Maggie," he went on, "was what you might have called a real free thinker. She was a great fancier of Shakespeare. You've read *Julius Caesar*."

"Of course."

"Then you remember that after the assassination Anthony was allowed to speak to the citizens of Rome. He read Caesar's will and told them 'to every several men'—I think those were the words—Caesar had left seventy-five drachmas. Aunt Maggie thought that was a great way to be remembered. So she had a plan to leave ten dollars to every name in a certain telephone directory. A pretty good sized one." . .

"What a magnificent idea!"

"Wasn't it?" Dab sighed. "So I guess they had pretty good grounds for restraining her."

I didn't ask what had finally become of her money. It didn't seem important. Another point far overshadowed it. "Dab! All that time. All those years! You had some pretty thin days when you desperately wired Mark for money. But you never touched Ludwig."

"I had to keep the faith," he said simply.

The whole thing was so wonderfully crazy! "I'd think you'd have put the bear away somewhere—in a vault."

"Aunt Maggie specified that I carry it with me at all times. She insisted that I never be strapped."

"Or always be tempted?"

"Maybe. Uncle Fred always said that the measure of a man was how he reacted in emergencies."

"And now you're sure the time has come?"

"Very sure."

I went right into his arms. "Then we'll start tomorrow, darling. Have you already bought Malvern Manor?"

Once his thoughts had veered away from the subject of Aunt Maggie, his faintly saddened mood changed. His enthusiasm returned and there was an eager glow in his eyes. "I took care of most of that today. Normally, it would be slow business, but I saw some people and pulled a few strings."

"And they took your money?"

"The state did. In escrow sort of. The place had been taken over for taxes—thirty-one hundred dollars—and it was up for grabs, with nobody grabbing. There's some legal hodge-podge about notifying the

owner and giving him a certain length of time to redeem it. But I've been assured there will be no trouble in that direction. So we can go right to work."

"I'm ready, darling. Just hand me a dust cloth."

"My biggest moment will be when Mark sees what we've done and puts money into the deal—once I get his vote of confidence."

"Will that ever happen?"

"Certainly. Mark's fair. He'll accept proof."

I brushed his lips with mine. "Your *biggest* moment, darling?"

He answered satisfactorily. "Next to the first moment I ever laid eyes on you. I'll never forget that one. I wanted to—"

"You wanted to what?"

"Lay you down in the heather and make love to you right then and there!" he whispered fervently.

I breathed hard on his neck. "I remember that moment, too, lover. And one of the greatest disappointments of my life was that you didn't . . ."

Six

"Too bad this road doesn't lead to Malvern Manor," Dab said.

He spoke just as the front wheels hit a foot-deep chuck hole, and I thought I heard the bones crunch in my upper spine as my neck snapped.

"If it did, it would be more dangerous than any ski run," I said.

"Great sense of humor," he chuckled as though I'd been joking, which I hadn't.

We were around behind Rebel Mountain and were moving away from it. "Another three or four miles should get us there," Dab said, referring to Hog Hollow. The trip we were making that morning was with an eye to recruiting help, and the man to see was Trubal Elder.

The trip seemed endless. All my teeth were still in my head, no small boast, when we rounded a turn and saw a collection of slovenly, makeshift dwellings sprawled aimlessly across a flat valley that appeared to have been carved out by the Great Glacier.

As I surveyed the eerie site, I recalled some photographs I had once seen of jobless Americans of the early 1930's who were living in hovels they had set up in a city dump. The houses of Hog Hollow were not much better.

"My God!"

The exclamation came out unbidden, and Dab made a wry face. "Not bad people, though. A proud bunch. Good workers, too."

"I'll *bet*."

"Don't condemn them without a hearing."

"I'm not condemning anyone. But where have I heard the maxim that a man's home tends to reflect his pride and industry?"

We'd leveled off from the higher, winding road and were approaching the "street" along which the dwelling places were located. The largest one at the near end indicated that the owner had fallen into a legacy of doors. The house, along box-car lines, had been constructed almost entirely of such discarded panels; doors of many sizes and many colors. Just to make them fit together had required a certain degree of ingenuity.

Our arrival set off a tremendous commotion among the dogs. A pack of hostile canines, as diverse in size and coloring as the homes of their masters, attacked the car from all sides.

"Don't be afraid," Dab reassured, trying to steer his way through the loping, yelping mass.

"I'm not—as long as I'm in here with the doors locked and the windows up."

No less plentiful were the children of Hog Hollow. They were everywhere—sitting in mud puddles, peering from roof tops, hanging through paneless windows—all regarding us in rigid, unblinking silence. There was not an adult to be seen.

"Where is everybody?" I asked. "Are all the parents off working?"

"No. The hillbillies hereabouts don't mix much with outlanders."

"I'd hardly regard showing themselves in their own community as mixing."

Then a human face did appear. The door to one of the domiciles opened, and Trubal Elder stepped out on the single cement building block that served as a front stoop. Dab smiled and waved with a cheerfulness to which Trubal made no response whatever. Wearing the scowl I'd come to associate him with, he moved toward the car. The dogs fell back in waves as he advanced.

"You're Cater," he said, his words more of an accusation than a greeting.

"Sorry I missed you last night," Dab replied. "This is my wife, Pagan. But you two have met."

Trubal Elder acknowledged this by not denying it. The last of the dogs broke up to reveal a child who had been hidden in the cluster; a begrimed mite. Practically naked, but still wearing enough clothing to make its sex a puzzle, it grasped Trubal's leg and began to climb.

He reached down and picked it up. It threw skinny little arms around his neck and clung like a burr. Trubal's supporting hand looked huge in comparison to the tiny torso.

"Sam Ludlow suggested I talk to you—"

"Had a word with Sam," Trubal said. "Step out and come in if you care to."

He turned and walked back toward the house, a long, low, boxlike affair made partly of wood and partly of sheet metal. There were four windows on the visible side, all of different sizes. Three of them

boasted complete panes. He strode back as he'd come, and I made every effort to catch up, because Trubal seemed to be the only defense from the dogs that were still growling belligerently.

Inside, there was a weird hodge-podge of furniture: an amazing collection that ran from an upturned orange crate upon which a dozen books were piled, to an ornate mirror that hung from a railroad spike driven into a plank close to the ceiling.

Trubal's "sit down," was more of a command than an invitation, and as we found chairs, he twisted his head and looked at the waif he was carrying as though he wondered where and how he'd acquired the child. He went to one of the windows and lowered his burden out into the street, after which he straightened and asked, "What did you have in mind?"

"I'm going to do something with Malvern Lodge. I just negotiated the purchase—"

"You mean you paid up the back taxes and took it over."

"Well—yes. I'm going to turn it into a ski lodge."

"That will take a little doing—and a lot of money."

"I figure that with a crash operation I can have it ready by next season."

"Any idea of what your problems are?"

"The main one is access. But I don't plan to build a road immediately. I've figured out a way to utilize the path around Rebel Mountain." Dab explained his idea.

"It might work. Ski buffs are a queer lot. They might not object to roughing it. But you'd be better off with a road."

"Of course, but—"

"A lot of other problems, though. You'd have to pipe the main lodge for water. And wire it for light. And how about building the ski runs?"

"Rebel Mountain is natural for skiing. There are two natural runs that would require very little work."

"A ski lift. Power for the lift. A power plant for light. A telephone line. How much money have you got to sink into this project?"

"I have access to capital," Dab said carefully.

Trubal Elder snorted as he pushed the books off the orange crate and sat down. "It had better be unlimited."

"You don't think the project feasible, then?"

"I didn't say that. It depends on how much you want it. There are a lot of obstacles. Maybe you'll get a good start and then give up."

"We have no intention of giving up," I said coldly. I was beginning to resent Trubal strongly. It had been my understanding that we'd come to recruit some unskilled labor, not to go into consultation on our project. But Dab seemed quite eager to listen to Trubal.

"To begin with, what would you pay for a good road into the place?" Trubal asked.

"It would help a lot, of course," Dab replied, "but I figure it would cost a minimum of ten thousand.'

"I'll get you a good serviceable road for a thousand. Is it worth it?"

"That's impossible!"

Trubal shrugged. "Take it or leave it."

"You're serious?"

In the light from the window, Trubal Elder now looked like a gaunt, evil Lincoln. "I'm always serious."

Dab was pondering the matter. "Sam Ludlow said you were the man to see—" he murmured.

"I don't consider that much of a compliment. Sam's a good innkeeper but he's too loyal to his friends. If Sam liked an embezzler he'd recommend him for a bank teller's job if there happened to be one open."

"But how can you build a road for a thousand dollars when—"

"I wouldn't build it. I just happen to know where there's one already built. I could have it cleared in three days."

"You've got a deal!"

"First, let me give you some honest advice." Trubal Elder's eyes had turned in my direction. They were warning me of the evil in which I was already entangled. His look escaped Dab completely, which was as it should have been because the look was for me alone. But I refused to acknowledge it. I turned my eyes away.

"Give the whole idea up," Trubal said. "Forget it. Go back to the city and find yourself a good nine-to five job."

"That's peculiar advice. You don't feel the ski lodge is an impractical idea. So why—"

"It's just good advice, that's all."

I wanted to break in and tell Trubal that the nonsense he'd witnessed—the instability he had every right to suspect in me—was a thing of the past; that both my feet were solidly on the ground now and that there would be no more silly hallucinations.

But that was impractical; and unnecessary because Dab had gotten to his feet and was speaking coldly. "We have no intention of giving up the idea—unless

you can give me solid proof of why it won't work."

"Why should I do that?" Do you want the road, or don't you?"

"Of course I want it."

"Then if you've got a checkbook with you, write out a check to me for five hundred dollars. The rest will be payable when I deliver the road and deeds to certain rights-of-way I'll have to buy. That is, if you're dead set on going ahead with the thing."

"We're going ahead," I told him.

"Do you think you'll be happy, Mrs. Cater? Out here so far from civilization?"

It occurred to me that he was mocking my British background, and I resented it. "A look at history would show you that we English have a talent for taking civilization with us wherever we go."

Dab laughed, but that irritated me also. I had no doubt he was on my side, but there was too much *Isn't she a bright little girl?* in his tone. I half expected him to pat me on the head.

Trubal Elder took the statement under somber consideration. "Yes, the English are famous for civilizing their less cultured cousins. But the cousins have been known to snap at the hand that guided them. You'll find that this area still smells of the Revolution."

I knew his "smells" could be interpreted any way I chose. I chose to consider it hostile. "You should have met my Grandfather Higgins. He was fighting the American revolutionists right up to the day of his death. I think his defense of the Crown would be more effective than mine. For years I've been of the opinion that war was over."

"Many things are never over."

Dab laughed. "All right, you two, let's call an armistice. There's work to do. Sam Ludlow told me that you might be in touch with the help I'll need at the lodge. Groundsmen—that sort of thing."

"What tools can you furnish?"

Dab looked blank. "I haven't checked. There may be some equipment around the place—in those outbuildings."

"The things of value were cleared out long ago. Only the manor house itself was left alone."

"I see. Well, I guess you'll have to regard me as the inexperienced promoter of this project. I'll need advice. Maybe we can make a deal."

It seemed to me we'd made enough deals for one day. I arose from my chair, and Trubal Elder moved as if anticipating me. He went to a shelf at the end of the narrow room and returned with a book.

"Maybe you'd like to read this during your spare moments. I found it interesting."

The book was quite old but still in good condition, although the title had been worn away by many handlings.

"Thank you."

Outside, after we'd gotten back into the car, Trubal said, "I'll look Malvern Manor over when I get to it and then drop around and we'll have another talk."

"That will be fine, Dab replied. He was grinning like an excited child. "But let's start calling it by it new name—Cater's Ski Lodge."

Trubal Elder said nothing, and as we drove away I could feel his eyes burning into the back of my neck. . . .

Seven

Dab was scowling. "I wonder why in the devil they boarded up this section? You'd think old Malvern had left his money in there or something."

"It would certainly have been a better place than an old beat-up teddy bear."

He grabbed for me but I ducked and evaded him, laughing as I ran through the tall grass toward the lake.

My spirits were high again, my hostilities toward Trubal Elder having waned as soon as we had left Hog Hollow. As we headed back toward the highway I again saw him in his true values—a highly educated, brilliant, shiftless eccentric. I was a little ashamed of myself for having let him get under my skin and decided it was because he shared my secret.

But that was all over. The nonsense was finished and from now on Trubal Elder would be no more than he actually was—a man who could help us get Cater's Ski Lodge into shape.

I drew on Dab's vibrant mood and laughed with him as he caught me at the edge of the lake and rolled me over in the grass.

"*Mister* Cater! Is this seemly? Please allow me to pull my skirt down."

"*Mrs.* Cater. That's the silliest thing you've said today. Why do you think I pulled it up?"

"But people will see you!"

"What people?"

"For all you know the woods may be full of prying eyes."

"Then they're lucky. Where else could they see a pair of legs like yours? How about a swim? In the altogether."

"I understood you were planning a ski lodge—not a nudist colony."

"Yes, but a few girls wandering around without their bikinis might help business."

He was so wonderful—so excitingly vital. Lying there with his face close to mine, all my love burst forth and wrapped itself around us like a blanket. I pulled him closer.

"Oh, Dab darling. You put up with so much from me!"

"What do you mean, put up with so much?"

"My spells of idiocy. You must see me as pretty unstable."

"I see you as a gorgeous little dreamboat, not to mention a maddening sex symbol and a—"

"Is that all you married me for—my beautiful body?"

He was nuzzling my cheek. "I wouldn't go so far as to say that, but let's face it. Those legs of yours and those other—ah, assets, make a nice dowry."

"Just a slave upon which to vent your lust," I sighed.

"A great thought. Shall we vent a little?"

"Not here. There are some sharp pebbles under my rump."

"Aha! Not willing to suffer for love! Is that it?"

"Frankly, I do prefer overstuffed mattresses. Dab—"

"Yes?"

"I was thinking about Jim Malvern."

"What about him?"

"He probably boarded up that old section of the Manor."

"Why?"

"His wife committed suicide in there, you know."

"I heard something about it. Why did she kill herself?"

"I don't know. But it was very tragic."

"Such things always are."

"She was from England, too."

He frowned. "Oh, cut it out, will you? That happened ages ago. Let's rip those planks down and see what's in there."

"All right."

We got up and went back to the lodge and stood looking up at the great oak.

"They call this the Hanging Tree."

"Hmmm. It's big enough to hang a regiment from, all at once. It's certainly a beauty. Great asset for the ski lodge."

"It's hundreds of years old."

"Uh-huh. But I wonder if we shouldn't cut some of those branches away. They cover the whole end of the lodge. That's a window up there, isn't it?"

A breeze swept through the tree, and the sound was like a murmured objection.

Dab raised his arms. "I'm going up and look."

"No—don't!"

He leaped upward, grasped a low-hanging branch,

and pulled himself up into the tree. "Only be a moment."

I waited, peering up into the tree as I followed his progress. I wondered why I'd protested. Moving back, I stood pressed against the rough bark. As I waited I suddenly remembered Trubal Elder's book. I'd been carrying it since leaving the car by the highway on the other side of Rebel Hill, scarcely conscious of having it in my hands. Now I opened it to the title page. It was very old and yellowed and bore a strange title: *Tree Worship Among the Ancient Cults.*

I was amazed. Why on earth had Trubal Elder given me such a book? What possible interest could he have thought I had in tree worship?

Dab's complaints were sifting down through the thick green of the oak's branches. "These damn planks are nailed with railroad spikes."

"I could have told you that from looking at the windows down here," I called out.

"Sure, but I thought it might be easier up here."

I was idly thumbing through the pages of the book, catching lines here and there:

. . . *The belief that trees have living spirits has long prevailed among the peoples of lower Europe and still prevails today* . . .

"Guess there's no use," Dab growled. A man would need a crowbar . . ."

. . . *They saw trees as having consciousness, both malevolent and benign and as gathering places for the spirits of the dead. A tree could assume the spirit and personality of one who had loved it in life, and there were instances where—*

There was a sudden howl of surprise and a great

crashing sound. I screamed and sprang forward as Dab came plummeting down out of the tree.

He landed on his back with a sickening thud, and I screamed again as I dropped to my knees beside him.

His face was ashen under his tan, and his eyes stared up at me blankly.

"Dab! Dab! Oh, my God!"

His mouth was open, and his face worked agonizingly. I was blind with panic. In sheer desperation, I grasped his wrists and began pumping his arms as though I'd just pulled him out of a lake. Then I tried to roll him over on his back.

"Dab! Oh, Dab! Start breathing again! Please start breathing!"

"It's all—right," he finally gasped. He got up on his hands and knees. "Knocked the—wind out—was all. Stupid—of me."

I patted and fussed and made myself a general nuisance, giving him useless attention he was momentarily too weak to shake off.

"Don't talk. Just *breathe*, darling!"

Finally he struggled to his feet, grinning sheepishly. He tilted his eyes upward. "I'll bet I couldn't do that again in a hundred tries."

"You stay on the ground after this."

"I mean, fall, straight down like that—through all those solid branches. It was as though I came down through a greased tube. The silliest thing I ever did in my life."

"You might have landed on your head."

"Okay—no cracks about that being the safest way."

I was clinging to him, reveling in the feel of his chest pumping up and down.

"It just knocked the wind out of me—hey! What's that?"

He was looking down, then he pushed me away suddenly. My eyes followed his. I was bleeding. My leg had been gashed, and a surprising amount of blood had gushed down over my shoe.

"You sliced your leg!"

"But that's impossible. I haven't been anywhere."

He pushed me to the ground, lifted my leg and wiped my ankle with his handkerchief. There was a deep cut about an inch long in the calf about halfway to my knee.

"Did it happen down by the lake? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was perfectly all right. It had to happen just now."

"You didn't get it just standing still." He wiped the blood away. "You seem to have hit a small vein or artery."

"I was standing there by the tree waiting for you—"

"Hold that." He took my hand and pressed it to the handkerchief and went to the tree. I watched him as he inspected it. "This bark is pretty rough."

"Do you think the tree reached out and bit me?"

"Here it is. The bark comes out to a point. It's razor-sharp. And it's got a trace of blood on it."

He came back and knelt down and was all tenderness. Lifting my leg far higher than was decent, he kissed my ankle. "If there's a scar I'll chop that damned tree down and use it for firewood."

"Oh, it's only a scratch," I said. "I get it. You're just trying to divert attention from your own clumsiness."

The bleeding had practically stopped. He wiped the last of the blood away. "Don't take it so lightly. Gangrene might set in. They'd have to cut off your leg—maybe clear up to the hip. Then we'd have the expense of a new one—" He became serious and frowned. "Let's see if it starts bleeding when you walk."

"It's all right, but let's get out from under this damned tree. It tried to cripple you and stab me to death. I don't think it likes us."

"I want to check the outbuildings to see what's left."

"Trubal Elder said they left the main lodge alone."

"Uh-huh."

"Why would people steal from the sheds and not touch the manor house?" I said.

"It's a kind of weird deal," Dab observed.

"One thing is sure. For a couple of big-time promoters, we know less about our property than anyone would imagine. Aren't you supposed to take surveys and get reports before you start a thing this big?"

Dab didn't seem worried. "If you do that, all you get are a lot of reasons why you can't possibly make it work out. After we get in booming, they'll tell us how it was a natural—how we couldn't have— Oops!"

Suddenly he was falling all over himself to keep from knocking down a suddenly imposed figure he'd bumped into. We were rounding a corner of the lodge and there she was—with her sweet, wondering face and her huge eyes and her shapeless gray shift. Dee Elder.

She stood like a statue as Dab comically pirouetted and imitated a tightrope walker until he got his balance again.

"Why don't you blow a whistle, young lady?"

"What on earth are you doing here, Dee?"

Dab glanced at me quizzically. "Do you two know each other?"

"I told you about Dee. I met her in that old graveyard the first day we were here."

"Oh sure. The spook bit."

"Dee, this is my husband, Dabney."

"Glad to meet you, Dee."

She had neither moved nor spoken. Only her eyes seemed alive as she looked at Dab. "The tree tried to kill you," she said.

First Dab was puzzled. Then he laughed. "You're not kidding!"

"The tree hates you."

"It does?"

Dab looked in my direction for help. "There's an old legend," I said. "They call that big oak the Hanging Tree hereabouts. It isn't a very nice legend but it has its points." I turned to Dee. "Does your grandfather know you're here?"

She appeared not to hear me. "The tree loves Abigail," she said. "But I don't know why."

"Dee, that's all nonsense. You shouldn't spend your time out here all by yourself. You should be in school—studying, learning. When people stay by themselves too much, they begin imagining things."

"Do you know why the tree hates you?"

She spoke to Dab and he shrugged, playing it lightly while he looked to me for guidance. "Darned if

I know," he replied. "I'm a pretty nice guy. I only beat my wife when I get drunk."

"You'd better go home, Dee," I said firmly. "Your grandfather will be hunting for you."

Voicing neither agreement nor objection, she turned and walked toward the lower side of the estate, beyond which lay the old graveyard. She was a marvelously graceful child; she appeared to float rather than walk through the tall grass.

Dab stared after her. "What an odd kid. She's from Hog Hollow, you say? Trubal Elder's granddaughter?"

"Not exactly. He gave her his name. It seems they breed somewhat at random in that community."

"Hmmm. What's that saying? It's a wise child—?"

"Let's not point the finger of scorn. Just take her advice and stay out of that tree."

Dab squinted at the lowering sun. "Maybe we'd better call it a day and head for home. We've still got to hike back to the highway."

"I suppose we might as well. There's nothing we can do around this place with just our bare hands."

We walked, hand in hand, up the slope, and it occurred to me that I had never been quite as happy as I was at that moment.

We reached the fringe of the forest and paused to look back at the estate we proposed to turn into a profitable commercial venture.

It lay still and silent under the rays of the slanting sun, and if one wanted to use a little imagination it was not difficult to see in Malvern Lodge a certain virginal beauty, imminent and veiled like the bud of an exotic flower waiting to burst open.

"There ought to be something we could do to lure the summer crowd, too," Dab said. "It would be a shame to make money only in the winter."

"Down boy!" I laughed. "One thing at a time. Let's ring up that first winter dollar. Then we'll think about summer.

We reached the highway and drove to the cutoff that led to Patch Lake. The hike around Rebel Mountain had taken quite a bit of time, and dusk was falling as we approached the cottage.

"Let's go right on to Ludlow Inn," Dab said. I'm dying for a scotch, and there are some things I want to ask Sam before he gets busy."

"But I'm filthy. I want a bath. Why don't you leave me at the cottage and go on and get your questions over with. Then drive back and get me in about an hour?"

"Okay," he said. "An hour. But be ready or the day's special will be all eaten up."

"What is it?"

He braked the car and, hooking his hand behind my head, drew me close in a moment of quick warmth. "I don't know, honey, but I do know what I'm going to have for dessert when we get home."

"Promises!" I murmured and slipped out of the car after a quick kiss.

The car moved swiftly out of sight, and I ran into the house and pumped water for my bath. I lit the stove and lugged the two big pans from the hand pump and started them heating.

After that I stood at the front door and looked out into the forest. A breeze had sprung up and all the trees were whispering; like old ladies in green night-

gowns, I thought, gossiping about the day's happenings.

The first chill of evening touched me lightly. Nightfall. The whispering forest. Night things emerging.

The whispering. The whispering . . .

Paaagaaan—Pagan Cater—I'm waiting for you—

The night chill. A little colder now.

The chill of an old grave.

Paaagaaan—I'm calling to you. You must come, Pagan. You must come to me—

The voice of the night. The voice of the grave.

"Yes, Abigail. I hear you. I'm coming—I'm coming."

But I did not move. A sob arose from deep in my throat.

Paaagaaan—

"I'm coming, Abigail—"

I ran from the house and crossed the road and plunged into the dark forest. . . .

Eight

Dr. Wincroft had a pleasant voice and a pleasant smile. I liked them far better than his red necktie and the idea of lying down on his couch. We disposed of the couch quickly.

"Of course it isn't necessary," he said. "The main point here is to communicate. You may use the chair if you wish. Make yourself comfortable."

I expected to be terribly embarrassed, but I was not. He seemed a pleasant enough person, even with the glaring necktie and, well, I had promised Dab. At the time, that had seemed the least I could do.

"As I understand it," Dr. Wincroft said, "your husband found you lost in the woods up there—in an old cemetery."

"It wasn't quite that way," I corrected. "Another man, a native of the area named Trubal Elder, found me and escorted me home."

"I see. How did he happen to find you at midnight in a dark forest?"

"His granddaughter, a teen-aged girl named Dee Elder, told him I was there." I paused for a moment. "And now I suppose the next question is how did Dee Elder know I was there?"

"The main point is: *why* were you there?"

He had an excellent "couchside manner." He did

not make it sound like an interrogation. His tone reflected a casual friendly interest.

He isn't judging me, I thought, and for that I was grateful.

But of course he was judging me, as ably as he knew how.

"To say I don't know," I replied, "sounds rather futile, doesn't it?"

"Perhaps, but still I'm sure you're entirely sincere. My job is to help you find the reason." It was his turn to pause. "No, that's not quite right. *Our* job is to find the reason together. I think you're aware of it now, Mrs. Cater. And you can't tell me for one of two reasons."

"What are they?"

"First, you're here to please your husband, to relieve his anxiety as to your condition. But you are quite satisfied with your condition, and so you want to get this over with as quickly and politely as possible."

"And the other reason?"

"You are unable to put it into words you feel I would understand. You expect a negative reaction from me and feel the whole discussion is quite futile."

"You're quite wrong about the first. If you want the truth, I *am* scared and definitely not satisfied with what's happening to me."

"That's a big step in the right direction."

"As to the futility of this discussion—you may have something."

"As I understand it, there have been certain incidents in your immediate past that have disturbed your husband."

"No. I think the only incident he was disturbed about was night before last. There have been things that disturbed me, but I don't think he was aware of them."

"Are you saying that through any sense of resentment toward him?"

"Definitely not. There was no way Dabney could have known."

"Suppose you tell me about them." When I hesitated, he said, "Why don't you start by telling me why you went to that graveyard in the dead of night."

I had been looking at his necktie. Now I was looking into his eyes. They were friendly and gazed into mine steadily. I vauely wondered if he was trying to hypnotize me. I doubted it but it made no difference because he would have been unable to. I was hardly the type.

"You did go to the cemetery, didn't you? You just didn't wander off."

"I went to the cemetery."

"Why?"

I decided the smartest thing to do was get rid of him quickly. A few straight facts would, I was sure, destroy his casual attitude and make him wary. A few more and he would draw some logical conclusions. What he told Dab would be another matter, but I would face that problem when I came to it.

"Abigail called me," I said.

"Who is Abigail?"

I took a deep breath. "Abigail Bennington. She was the wife of Richard Bennington, a spy who was hanged by the British during the American Revolu-

tion." His expression did not change. He did not reach for the phone to call the sanitarium people. He just sat there.

"Abigail Bennington is buried in that cemetery?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about her."

"She was twenty-two years old when she died. That was shortly after her husband was hanged. I think she went mad. I think perhaps she is still mad."

"I assume you are saying that her conscious spirit still exists."

"Yes."

It had turned into a contest now. I'd made my first thrust, and I watched him for a reaction. He looked thoughtfully at a pencil on his desk and picked it up.

"We'll come back to that, but let me digress for a few moments, Mrs. Cater. I understand you are in this country for the first time."

"Yes."

"You spent your life in England?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever in the past been particularly interested in the American Revolution?"

"No. But my Grandfather was. I heard a great deal about it as a child."

"I see. Do you consider yourself a particularly sensitive person?"

"No."

"Have you ever before had occult experiences?"

"Never. On the contrary, I've had little patience with such nonsense."

He leveled a quick, keen glance. "And you expect me to have little patience also."

"I don't expect you to believe anything I tell you."

The pause was quite long. He appeared to be hunting a way to express himself. "Mrs. Cater, it isn't a matter of belief or unbelief. It's a problem of communication and advice."

"But you do not believe what has happened to me is valid. You do not believe in Abigail Bennington. You see my problem as resting in my own subconscious."

His smile remained patient and friendly. "Mrs. Cater, that doesn't matter. This is not an investigation into the validity or nonvalidity of the occult. If you want a plain answer to my beliefs on the subject, it is this: I don't know. I will say that I've never been given any actual proof that the spirits of the dead become active forces other than through the memory of the living. But in this case, it doesn't matter."

"How on earth can you say that?"

"It's only common sense. You'll admit you have a problem. And whatever the cause, only you can solve it. I can only counsel and advise. And my counsel and advice will be the same, whatever the cause."

"Somehow, that doesn't sound right."

"You must remember that this is only a discussion. You aren't here for psycho therapy. Besides, I don't know well enough to draw any conclusions at this point. You must take those factors into consideration."

"They're quite logical, I'll admit."

"Would you care to tell me what happened after you left your cottage so abruptly and went off into the woods?"

Tell him? Tell anyone? I hadn't been able to tell even Dab. . . .

The pitch blackness of the forest. The warm, exciting dark. And the Presence. The Presence that was Abigail Bennington. She was very much there. She had come from her grave and was calling me and her power was like a drug.

Tell Dr. Wincroft things of that nature? Tell him, rather, that his necktie was atrocious and keep other thoughts to myself.

The things I was aware of as I struggled through the forest, stumbling and frightened, yet fleet-footed and unafraid. Would he have understood such a ridiculous paradox?

Or would he have simply shaken his head sadly at my "formula for the invisible?" That was what I had termed it in my own mind. And I knew. I *knew*. The Presence was Abigail Bennington and the power was Hatred. Hatred was the nourishment of the relentless spirit that dominated Malvern Manor.

Time, I was aware, did not exist for the invisible. The Presence was as potent today as it had been that cold, rainy morning in 1776 when they buried Abigail Bennington, a young wife driven insane by misfortune, and assumed that to have been the last act of the tragedy.

But it had been only the beginning of a greater one. A tragedy of which I had become a part.

Reveal great truths of that sort to a dapper mental quack who was probably laughing at me from behind his diploma?

Hardly.

He would never have agreed with my premise: that

to be monumentally hated is as exciting as to be deeply loved.

But it was true. I was the object of Abigail Bennington's bitter hatred. I was the target of her dark rage as it manifested itself in the winds and the storms and the black directives that I compulsively obeyed.

Either that, or I had gone insane. And insanity I would never accept.

As to my actions of that night, they were quite simple. I went to Abigail Bennington's grave. And for the first time, I understood Dee Elder's lack of fear. There was a moon, thinly clouded over, and it cast a glow upon the stones and the grasses. A quiet place where the Presence dominated; where the spirit of Abigail Bennington sat enthroned.

A place of fear and dread only for those with senses too gross to become aware. For the select few, a center of warm, quiet excitement.

The Presence and the soundless voice: *The room must not be touched.*

I knelt by the grave and ran my fingers over the worn headstone. Like a blind person reading in Braille, I found the faint legend with my fingertips:

Abigail Bennington—Age 22—A Child of Misfortune Murdered Through Her Own Hand By The Sword of Injustice—May Her Innocent Soul Find Peace.

Murdered through her own hand by the sword of injustice. Whoever had carved those words understood. He had not expected Abigail Bennington to rest in peace. He had known that it would be impossible.

The room must remain as it is forever.

"Yes—yes."

The tree must not be touched.

"No."

It too must remain forever.

"Yes—oh, yes."

Not a branch must be touched.

"No—never."

Something touched my ankle as I knelt there, and I remembered Dee's words: *Black snakes live there . . .*

Children of the night. Companions of the dead. But the night was gentle, and the dead were not to be feared. There was only the Presence to be obeyed.

The Awareness. Exciting and wonderful. But confusing. It answered questions but at the same time posed news ones. The trees. Their murmuring voices. Can they be understood? The Hanging Tree. Its bad wood. Does it hate, too? Why did it try to kill Dab? . . .

"What are you doing here at this time of the morning?"

A voice of harsh reality that was like a dash of ice water; like being torn from a warm bed in a cold room.

The Presence receded contemptuously, and I saw Trubal Elder scowling down at me.

I hated him.

"What business is it of yours?"

He ignored my anger. "Are you giving in without a fight? I thought there was more to you than that."

My anger had no real substance, and it faded as he helped me to my feet. "I'm very tired."

"That's natural. You should be exhausted."

I realized the familiarity he'd asserted, treating me much as he treated Dee but without the compassionate undertones. His attitude with me was that of counselor with an older child who should have known better.

"I've been here only a few minutes."

"A few hours. It's dawn."

"I must have slept."

"This way," he growled, and led me out of the graveyard.

Nothing was said for a time. Then he broke the silence. "If you give in as easily as this, you're lost."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I merely took a walk and got confused."

"She isn't as strong as you think."

"You talk like an idiot. Who isn't as strong?"

"You know who I'm talking about." His contempt was for my evasion. "Abigail Bennington."

I laughed shakily. "I had respect for you, Mr. Elder. I never liked you, but I had respect. That's gone, though. Now I have no more respect for you than I have for myself. We're merely two mad people walking through the woods at an impossible hour."

"There are many forms of defiance," he said. "Yours is not unique. It's found in defiant juveniles and dope addicts—the more intellectual ones."

"Oh my," I mocked. "How you do carry on. How high intellect has been added to our madness."

"This way," he said, leading me off to the right. "It's easier."

"If you believe as you claim, why don't you protect Dee from Abigail Bennington?"

"If I was able to, do you think for a moment that I wouldn't?"

"You could take her away."

"That's no answer. You were far away."

"What do you mean?"

"She brought you clear from England."

"That's ridiculous! I married Dabney. That was what brought me here."

"There is always the obvious. But the point is—you're here."

His reference frightened me. It tore at a defense that I had constructed for myself. I suppose it would have had to have been called the defense of coincidence. I saw my contact with the spirit of Abigail Bennington as being entirely coincidental. I had seen myself always in a position to leave—to put myself beyond range of that baleful influence.

Even when it was the most powerful, I had that thought to fall back on: *When this ceases to interest and amuse me, I will leave.*

The thought of a deeper, broader evil than I had conceived of, frightened me, and I gripped Trubal Elder's arm. "Help me."

"I can't. And I wouldn't if I could. She has a hostage against me. She has Dee."

All my defenses were suddenly down. "What am I to do? What's to become of me?"

"Put it out of your mind now," he said, and there was a gentleness in his voice for which I was grateful. "You're tired and worn and you need sleep."

"What does she want of me? I'm all mixed up!"

"I told you before. You must find out. It isn't by chance. She's been calling to you all your conscious

life. Realize that. Now that you have become aware, become *completely* aware. Find out why she wants you."

"Perhaps she will tell me?"

"No. She will destroy you and wait again."

She will wait again.

The words thudded against my mind like the spiked ball of a mace swung from a brutal fist. Abigail Bennington had that power. Time did not dilute or lessen her. She had waited in those hills while the whole world changed around her. While a weak confederation of states had grown into the greatest world power. While the world had grown up and become infinitely more aware, it had not become aware of her or her power.

Millions had been born and had marched past her to death.

But Abigail Bennington remained.

The last of my strength vanished. I began to sob. "Help me. Please help me!"

He caught me before I fell and lifted me into his arms. "Find out *why*," he repeated. "It is the only advice I can give you."

I clung to him.

"We're almost there. You can rest."

Our arrival was hazy in my mind. I remember the frown on Dab's taut, distressed face.

"I found her wandering in the woods," Trubal Elder said. "She's exhausted. She needs sleep."

"But why would she go out into the woods?"

"She needs rest."

Dab put his arm around me and guided me toward the bed. "Why Pagan? Why did you do it?"

"Leave me alone—please—I'm very tired . . ."

I felt sorry for Dab. Awakening into guilt and completely chastened, I still drew warmth and comfort from his concern. It reflected his love.

He was so far out of his depth in this strange area that I wanted to take him in my arms and comfort him. But all my instincts arose against telling him the truth or even attempting it. So I told him I'd tried to reach Sam Ludlow's inn by taking a short cut.

"But honey, that wasn't the arrangement. I was coming back after you."

"I know, but I decided to save you the trouble."

He wanted to believe it and tried hard. "But you went in exactly the opposite direction."

"I was daydreaming. I got confused."

Then the inquiry went from: "Honey, this is a new side of you—a side I've never seen," through devious conversational routes to: "Baby, will you do me a favor?"

"Of course Dab."

"Will you drop in and see a man in the city?"

"What man?"

"He has a fine reputation."

"You mean—?"

"All right, so he's a psychiatrist. That doesn't mean you'd be a patient or that you need anything like that. But maybe he could give you some advice or—or something. . . ."

At first the request stung me. I came within a hair of lashing back. But his distress was so obvious and his love and concern so wonderful that I would have crawled down the road with my nose in the dust if it would have pleased him.

So an hour's session with Dr. Wincroft and his atrocious necktie was a small enough service to render Dab.

But take the Doctor in as a confidant? Ridiculous.

And I was sure he realized how I felt. He said, "I've enjoyed talking to you, Mrs. Cater. Your problem may be only a case of nerves. A layman's term, of course, but it seems to cover the situation."

"What will you tell my husband?"

He got to his feet and smiled easily as he held out his hand. "What can I tell him with so little knowledge of your background?"

I left with the feeling that he was glad to be rid of me. . . .

Nine

I THINK my return to normal encouraged Dab more than whatever report he got from Dr. Wincroft. I didn't ask him and he did not volunteer any information. It was a subject we avoided by common consent.

Also, the pressure was lifted from me. Either my resolution to please Dab constituted a strength in itself, or Abigail Bennington had exhausted some of her power that night in the graveyard and needed rest.

At any rate, I became so absorbed with the material matters at hand that the whole occult adventure receded into the dimensions of a dream. When thoughts of Abigail came, I drove them from my mind by consciously fixing it upon something else.

The first big news relative to Cater's Ski Lodge came when Trubal Elder showed us our new road. We had put a dozen of his taciturn Hog Hollowers to work at the manor, and after he recommended a local contractor who came and gave us an appraisal on the work involved, we set about feverishly improvising.

What could we do without in the beginning? How many of the crude inconveniences of Malvern Manor could we "customize" and pass off as informally functional facilities and thus postpone improvements? Not communication, certainly. Fun was fun, but

the type of guest we expected to attract would not be happy cut off from the world. However, the phone company agreed to run a line in temporarily, using trees as poles for the wire.

An electric generator, second-hand, was found at a not prohibitive cost, and the absolutely necessary plumbing work was not as frightening in its final figure as we had anticipated.

During this new burst of activity around Malvern Manor, I kept my mind rigidly turned away from the old fort wing. Whenever a surge of even mild curiosity arose in me, I instantly put my mind elsewhere. And at such times there were fleeting touches of satisfaction at thus defying Abigail Bennington.

She did not strike back, and in the course of a busy week, I had no urge whatever to visit her grave.

The old fort wing would have to be opened, of course. But we just didn't get around to it. Once or twice Dab moved in that direction, but I was always there with a suggestion of something else more important that needed doing. But it never came to a point where he was prompted to question my reluctance.

As our new and exciting activity progressed, we were drawn closer together, and there were memorable interludes.

One day Dab looked up from peering into the depths of a long-unused well we planned to salvage and saw me standing beside him.

He struck a pose. "Are those the most luscious legs in existence that I see before my eyes?"

Corny but wonderful. "Legs only for walking, it would seem, sire," I murmured demurely.

"Egad, maid! Then let us walk!" he cried, and seized my hand and, as the silent Hog Hollowers gaped, we ran off toward the woods as though Malvern Manor had suddenly frightened us.

We kept going, around Rebel Hill in the direction opposite the trail, until Dab pulled me through a wall of bushes and stopped in triumph.

"How do you like this?"

It was breathtaking. One of the unspectacular little streams that emptied into the pond below broadened out here into a secluded pool. There was a grassy bank beside it and a tinkling waterfall above—a small green gem of loveliness in an otherwise harsh forest.

"It's—beautiful."

"I found it the other day when I was following the proposed telephone line." He laughed, delighted at my pleasure.

"Dab—it's so lovely."

"And all ours."

"This is on our property?"

"Well—no, but I don't see any 'No Swimming' sign."

"Swimming? Without suits? Why, Mister Cater!"

"Why, Mrs. Cater! How revoltingly modest!" And he grabbed my sweater and pulled it out from under the belt of my slacks and, before I knew it, I was standing there in a bra.

"Hello, gorgeous," he whispered and fumbled with the hooks.

"But darling, the neighbors!"

"They're all rabbits, and they're used to scandalous goings-on."

We stripped and went into the crystal-clear pool and I had one tremulous moment—a frightful illusion of how easy it would have been to have missed Dabney; not to have been at that precise spot where we met in England. Ten minutes too late. An hour too early. How horrible!

Then he had me in his arms under water and he was kissing me. We surfaced, locked in each other's arms, the kiss still merging our mouths into one, and the wild, free, reckless feeling of love was almost unbearable.

"Dab—oh, my darling—"

His answering words were husky with warmth and passion. "Have I told you lately that I love you?"

"Not in the last ten minutes," I whispered, clinging to the wonder of him with my eyes closed.

"Not in the last month, I'm afraid."

"We've been awfully busy."

"We aren't busy now."

He carried me out of the water and up on the bank, and there I lay in his arms and knew complete and perfect safety. Nothing in this world or the next could touch me while I was wrapped in his love.

It was the most perfect moment of my life.

Later, we went hand in hand back down to Malvern Manor and found Trubal Elder waiting for us. As I caught sight of him I knew I must ask him about Dee. She had not been to visit us. The last time I'd seen her had been on our first trip to the Lodge when Dab fell out of the Hanging Tree.

Trubal had mentioned her. When I asked him later why he'd come to the graveyard that night, he'd said that Dee had sent him. She had gotten out of her

own bed to rouse him, and she told him Abigail had called me to the graveyard and that I was there. Rescuing me had been Trubal's idea, but knowledge of my presence there had come from Dee.

Trubal's first words drove all thought of the child from my mind. "Do you want to see your road?"

We looked around blankly. "What road?" Dab asked.

Then Trubal led us to a point south of the pond where the wall of the forest was so high and thick that it formed a veritable wall. He was carrying a scythe and he began slashing at the growth. Minutes later he broke through into an old wagon road.

Dab let out a whoop.

I gasped. "It was there all the time!"

"It goes to the highway?" Dab asked.

"There are a few short gaps. Actually, it's several roads going through several different pieces of property. The money I spent went to buy rights of way."

The sudden good fortune put Dab on the peak of elation. He seized Trubal Elder's hand and shook it violently.

"I'm going to inspect it," he cried. "Come on, Pagan."

My reaction was not quite the same. I was happy to see the road, of course, but I'd become highly curious. "I'll wait for you, darling," I said. "Don't get lost."

He went striding briskly along the weed-covered road and when he'd rounded a bend and was out of sight, I turned to Trubal. I saw no point in mincing words. "Why did you do this for us?"

His somber eyes questioned.

"Why did you go to all this trouble?"

"It was a neighborly act."

"You're quite right—it was—but you and the Hog Hollowers are not neighborly people. This activity, this ski lodge we plan to build—it's really aganst your interests."

"Why?"

"Because it brings outsiders into your area. It destroys your seclusion."

"Perhaps there is something more valuable to me than seclusion."

"Would you mind telling me what?"

"Going into that would hardly serve any purpose at the moment. Instead of asking pointed questions, why don't you accept the help I can give you on its face value?"

"If that's your answer, I suppose I'll have to. By the way, I haven't seen Dee around for a while. I'm in her debt for alerting you to my situation the other night—"

"Dee has not been feeling well."

"I'm sorry. Perhaps I could drop over to Hog Hollow and pay her a visit?"

An unexplainable wall of hostility had arisen between us. From my surprise and gratitude concerning the road, I'd gone into my direct inquiry as to Trubal Elder's motives. Whether that was the cause or not was difficult to say, but we were as far apart as we had been that first day in the graveyard. He was harsh, contemptuously remote. And my own hostility had sprung instantly to meet him.

"I doubt if you could spare the time for anything so unimportant," he said.

"You're being purposely rude. I'm certainly the best judge of how to spend my own time."

"Perhaps. But I've been wondering—when are you going to get around to opening the fort wing of the lodge?"

Unaccountably, unreasonably, I hated him. That's hardly a fair question. Are you implying that I have some personal reason for not entering the wing?"

The very mildness of his tone was biting. "I didn't say that. It just seems strange that you haven't been interested in inspecting all of your property."

"There's nothing strange about it. Whatever is in there will keep. It hasn't changed in generations."

"That would seem to be beside the point."

I waved my arm to indicate the dozen Hog Hollowers, Trubal Elder's men, who were working with scythes and shovels from one end of the estate to the other. "If I'm not mistaken, you've been directing the work around here. You haven't put any of the men to opening the old fort wing."

"That's hardly accurate. You and your husband have outlined the work."

"My husband—not I." Suddenly, quick panic swept through me. The feeling came in an instant—a subconscious reaction to what I saw when I turned my eyes toward the manor house.

There was a man—one of Trubal Elder's workers—standing under the Hanging Tree. He had a clumsy-looking contrivance in his hands, a pair of pruning shears that he manipulated from the lower end of a long pole. He had reached up into the oak,

and the pruning shears were clamped around one of the limbs.

"Stop it! Stop it, you fool!" I screeched and began running in that direction.

The man was of the typically oafish type who symbolized all the Hog Hollow males. None of them were capable of a quick physical reaction. My scream reached him and slowly penetrated his dim consciousness. The message finally went to his hands and the cutting process ceased.

Then there was a slow turning of his head and a blank expression on his face.

"Answer me! I asked you a question?"

His dull silence was maddening. He appeared to see me as an erratic female who had gone berserk, rather than as a responsible land holder objecting to the desecration of her property.

Tubal had arrived. Also, other workers around the place had turned their turgid attentions in our direction, and all the work had stopped.

"Will you tell this fool to answer me?" I demanded of Trubal.

The man said nothing. He'd pulled his tool out of the branches and laid it on the ground.

"I told him to prune the oak," Trubal said.

"What right had you to do that? Are you taking over here?"

"No. The order came from Mr. Cater. We decided that the limbs lie too heavily on the roof."

"*We* decided! I'm sure my husband gave no such ridiculous order!"

All the workers, to a man, had now dropped their tools. They were moving into a group and were now

gathered together near the big front door of the lodge.

The fool who'd tried to mutilate the Hanging Tree moved off to join them. None of them had spoken a single word, but they were now a sullen, hostile crew.

A touch of fright tempered my indignation. "Well, tell them to get back to work."

Trubal Elder's unruffled calm was maddening. "I don't think they would obey. You see, I'm not exactly their boss. Hog Hollowers are proud individualists."

"I never heard of such nonsense. I didn't tell them to stop working."

"They seem to think you did."

They were walking away. Without a backward glance and by some common consent, they were moving off in the direction of Hog Hollow. As I stared, helpless, they disappeared into the woods.

I fought to hold back the tears that came close to the surface. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" I stormed. "What are you trying to do? Ruin all our dreams?"

"Aren't you being a little melodramatic?"

"I merely stopped one of them from ruining this tree."

"I think you should try to compose yourself," he said gravely. "I'll go and have a talk with them."

He went after them, walking in slow, leisurely strides as though there had been no disturbance whatever. In a few moments I was alone.

I dropped to the grass and huddled there on my knees, sobbing miserably. Above me, the Hanging

Tree whispered with its thousands of green tongues. And my distraught mood was such that I heard the whispering as springing from some dark, sinister knowledge. There was no gratitude in the great oak's murmurings. Rather, a gloating satisfaction as it hung over me like a baleful cloud. . . .

Ten

"But I *did* tell him to prune the damn tree!"

I was still on the ground. Dab stood over me, his face a reflection of annoyance and bewilderment.

"And I told him to stop."

"All right. But why did everybody leave?"

"Because they're idiots."

"Are you telling me that just because you stopped the man from pruning the tree, everybody walked off the job?"

"You don't see anybody around, do you?"

"Pagan! Stop acting like a child. It couldn't have been like that. What did you do—antagonize them? Where did Trubal go?"

"He went after them."

"Why was pruning the tree such a big deal? Those branches are lying on the roof. They're in the way."

"I don't want it cut."

He stared at me, his eyes troubled as he tried to fathom the situation—a normal, logical, reasonable man trying to understand.

I wanted to jump up and rush into his arms and tell him I was sorry. I wanted to beg for his love and protection. But I couldn't. He was worried about my sanity already, and anything I did or said to make

him understand would only have increased his doubts.

I could only cry out to him silently: *Oh, darling. Please help me. Please love me enough to reach across and take me in your arms because I can't come to you. I'm trapped. I'm sinking. I'm frightened and I can't explain. Please help me.*

But it was useless.

"I don't understand the thing you've got about this tree," he said.

"It isn't a *thing*. This is a beautiful tree and I think mutilating it would be a crime!"

"We aren't going to mutilate it. I just ordered it trimmed."

"All right then! Trim it! Pull it up by the roots! I don't care what you do with it!"

Even though I fought hysteria, the tears flooded out again. I scrambled to my feet and ran.

"Pagan!"

I fled blindly toward the forest wall.

"Pagan! Stop being a child! Come back here!"

I ran into the forest, wanting to stop but not daring; hoping he would follow me, yet dreading the sound of his footsteps.

He did not follow. I pushed on, half blinded by my tears, and came finally back to the idyllic little sanctuary where, such a short time ago Dab and I had laughed and splashed naked in the pool and made love.

Such a short time ago, but now it seemed like an age. We had been so close, but now it was all ripped apart again. And I knew each break would be harder to mend as he began losing faith in me.

I cried for a long time. Then the sweet, childish voice of Dee Elder broke the forest silence.

Satan slept at Rebel Hill,
When the Redcoats came.
He hung the brave young Richard,
And Cain was Satan's name.

I'd been lying on the grass with my head in my arms. When I heard Dee, I sat up and made an attempt to compose myself. Then she saw me, and her smile indicated that it gave her pleasure. There was no surprise in her gentle face, and I got the feeling that if I'd been standing on my head wearing hip boots, her reaction, or lack of it, would have been the same. Dee Elder seemed incapable of showing surprise.

"Hello, Pagan."

"Hello, Dee. Aren't there any other verses to that song?"

"Oh yes. Shall I sing—?"

"No, just tell me why you're wandering around out here. Your grandfather told me you weren't feeling well."

"Oh, I feel fine."

"I want to thank you for sending him to me the other night."

"That's all right."

"How did you know I was there in the graveyard?"

"I don't know. I mean I don't know how I knew. I just did."

"Perhaps Abigail told you."

"I don't think so."

"Why *did* you tell your grandfather?"

"I didn't want Abigail to hurt you."

"But how could she hurt me? Abigail is dead."

"No she isn't."

"I mean she has no body. She is only a spirit. She couldn't shoot me or stab me or hit me."

"Abigail has friends."

"Who are they?"

"The trees."

I almost blurted out, *Dee! That's nonsense!* Then I recalled the book on tree worship Trubal Elder had given me. And I remembered my sudden, senseless panic when I saw the man reaching into the Hanging Tree with his pruning shears.

I shivered. What was truth? What was nonsense? I had no feeling for that oak. There was no *thing*, as Dab had put it.

But then why was I here? Why had work stopped at the manor? Why had I fled from Dab, ashamed to face him?

My reaction to the chaos in my mind was a sudden warm feeling for Dee. I held out my hand. Come and sit with me, dear. Tell me some more about yourself."

Dee came and sat down cross-legged, like an obedient student whose teacher had given an order.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"Oh yes. And some half-brothers and half-sisters. My father was married to my mother and then he was married to my mother's sister—that was my aunt. Then he married my cousin. My mother married a man who is now married to one of my older sisters, and—"

"Dee! Wait a minute!"

I was going to ask her if she was serious. Then I saw that such a question might hurt her. There could be no doubt that she was telling the truth.

"Are you sure you know who your parents are?"

I regretted even that question, but Dee took no offense. "I know who my mother is. And I'm sure my father is the one who lived with my mother when I was small."

"Who does he live with now?"

"I don't know. He left the Hollow. He works in some town now."

"Tell me, what would happen to Hog Hollow if your Grandfather Trubal left?"

"He'd never leave. He loves us."

I put a quick arm around her. "I love you too, Dee."

"I'm glad," she said solemnly.

"Do you love Abigail?"

The question made her think. "No, I guess not."

"Are you afraid of her?"

"Afraid?"

The question seemed to puzzle her. "I don't think so. I think I feel sorry for her."

"Is there any way we can help her?"

"I help her. Sometimes I make her happy."

"What do you do to make her happy?"

"I catch rabbits when she tells me to—in traps."

"That seems a strange way to make Abigail happy. Does she like rabbits?"

"She hates them. She hates everything that is alive. I think that's because she's dead."

"What do you do with the rabbits?"

"I hang them."

"You—*what?*"

"I hang them," Dee said placidly. "I set traps and come and look at the traps and when there is a rabbit in one of them I take it out and hang it."

"Why, Dee? Why do you hang the rabbits?"

"It makes Abigail laugh. It makes her happy."

The pleasant little glade had suddenly turned chilly. I looked up and realized that the sun had dropped below the tree line, its rays no longer sifting in to touch the crystal-clear pool.

But the chill was more than a sudden absence of sunlight. It had a silent sound to it and I could hear the sound. It was laughter. Abigail, laughing not at hanged rabbits but at me; a sound as coldly contemptuous as death itself.

"Is that what you have been doing, Dee?"

"Yes."

I got to my feet and held out my hand. "Show me."

"Yes, Pagan," she said obediently. She put her hand into mine and led me down a path so tightly bordered by high weeds that I would not have found it alone.

After a few minutes she stopped. "That's the trap."

She pointed to a small wooden cage with a drop door ingeniously fastened to a trigger looped to a string. The string went down through the top of the cage and inside.

Smiling, Dee turned and pointed. "That's the rabbit I caught today."

I supposed it was by sheer accident that the bush she'd selected looked like the Hanging Tree. But it did. The base consisted of a thick cluster of closely packed shoots that fanned out into a thick green min-

iature of the oak that brooded over the old fort wing of Malvern Manor.

The thought of putting a loop of tough creeper around a rabbit's neck and suspending it off the ground to kick its life away did not seem to me to be a monstrously inhuman act. But when I tried to associate it with Dee's innocent nature and sweet face, it became monstrous indeed.

"Abigail made you do that?"

"Yes, I guess she did."

"Does it make *you* happy?"

"No, it makes me sad. The poor little rabbit. It kicked and squealed. It didn't understand why it had to die."

With the sun lowering, deep shadows came swiftly. "You must run home, Dee, before it gets dark. I'll—I'll come and visit you."

"That will be nice."

She turned back as we'd come and just before the trees hid her, she waved and smiled, an innocent child going home from an afternoon's play of hanging rabbits and watching them squeal and kick and die.

My panic was all gone; my hysteria a thing of only faint memory. Turning from the place, I went back to the pool. But it too had changed. It was not a place where Dab and I had made love. It was one where the crazed malevolent spirit of Abigail Bennington had come to taunt and mock me; to flaunt her control of a feeble-indeed girl.

And she was still there, forming some of the shadows that the unseeing would have charged to the lowering sun.

I spoke to her. "I'm not afraid of you, Abigail. You can't hurt me."

Silent voiceless laughter.

"Why don't you stay in your grave?"

The unvoiced words were enveloped in fierce hatred. *The tree must not be touched.*

"I'll have it cut down."

A cold little wind-devil spurted out of the bushes and rushed at me, chilling my ankles and lifting my skirt.

"Why do you hate me so?"

You are afraid of the tree. You are afraid of the room.

"I am not afraid of the room."

When I call, you must come. I am getting impatient.

"You're pathetic. I am no longer afraid of you."

As I crossed the soft green bank, moving downward toward Malvern Manor, the tendril of a creeping vine—I'd have sworn it had not been there before—snatched viciously at my ankle and brought me to my knees. I turned on it and jerked it viciously away. Thus, my own impatience was responsible for the quick gash that bit into the fleshy side of my hand. I threw the thing from me as though it were a snake.

The tree must not be touched, Pagan Cater. The tree must not be touched.

I went down the hill and away from the place, moving through a vast colony of dark, monstrous trees, and it was as though their murmurings were curses; as though their great, smothering weight would drop on me at any moment. . . .

"I'm not afraid of you, Abigail Bennington," I whispered as I hurried along.

But she must have gone back to her grave to rest because she did not answer me. Her spirit had vanished, leaving only the empty air. . . .

I found Dab sitting on a rock staring into the now-black waters of the pond. He raised his eyes as I approached.

"I'm sorry, Dab. There was no reason for me to lose my temper."

He pulled me down beside him. "I'm the one to be sorry." "You were upset and you ran," he said. "I should have followed you and apologized."

He put his arm around me, and we sat close together on the rock, his arm and his side and his thigh warming me like a caress.

"I guess I'm pretty thoughtless," he said.

"That's not true!"

"Back on your tight little island they'd call me a bounder."

"You're wonderful. As a wife, I'm a complete dope."

He raised his eyes to gaze at the manor house. "We *can* make a go of this, Pagan!"

"You want it very badly, don't you, darling?"

"I'm beginning to realize how much."

"Then we'll have it."

He lifted my hand and kissed the palm. "We'll leave the tree as it is."

"On the contrary, we'll trim the thing within an inch of its life—down to a stump. We'll make it start all over again."

Dab laughed and turned his head until our noses touched. He looked deep into my eyes. "You're crazy. Do you know that? Mad as a coot."

"Oh, is that so? I didn't carry a worn-out teddy bear all over the world—"

"Watch it!" he growled, with laughter bubbling just behind the words. And he rolled me off the rock into the grass.

He pushed me over on my back and sat on me and held my wrists. "Now, what was that you said?"

As he spoke, he reached around behind his back and I began bucking like a wild filly. "Stop it!" I shrieked. "I can't stand being tickled! You know I can't!"

"I wasn't sure before," he grinned. "How about—there?"

I howled like a person demented and pounded my heels against the grass.

"And there—"

"Dab! Have mercy! I'll pay! I'll be your slave!"

His mood changed suddenly and the whole weight of his body was stretched out on mine and our lips brushed together.

"I love you, Pagan Cater," he whispered huskily.

"Oh, Dab—"

There in the grass with his arms tight around me, it was like another place and another time. The great oak was only a lazily murmuring tree, and there was nothing in the room beyond those barricaded windows. Nothing at all.

"Dab—oh darling! What's to become of me? I want so much to always be a part of you."

If there was any fear of tomorrow in my plea, he

missed it. "It can't ever be any other way, honey. It just can't."

We lay there for a long time and then the moon came up and we took the path around Rebel Hill. We had come to know the path well. It was not tedious or long, because we were together and we had our dream.

"I'm not afraid of you, Abigail."

Dab was a little ahead of me. He turned his head. "What was that, honey?"

"Nothing, darling—nothing."

I was glad that I had only whispered my defiance. . . .

Eleven

The times are troubled indeed, and one hardly knows friend from enemy.

That quote was from a book I found in the library at Chilton. The library consisted of a small room over the fire house and was presided over by a little old lady with the most amazing skein of wrinkles I had ever seen.

She looked to be incredibly old, but her manner and spirit were as bright as a chirping wren. "Oh yes, we have a great deal of local lore here, Mrs. Cater. We're very proud of our past and I'm always happy when researchers call on us." An old face with remarkably young eyes. "And researchers do come. Oh my, yes! Much of our material has appeared in the finest book on the American Revolution."

"I'm quite interested in that period."

"Any particular phase of it?" When I hesitated, she said: "It was quite complex, you know. A very complicated period. Not nearly as cut and dried and black and white as people imagine."

I wasn't sure what that meant. I said, "My husband and I have purchased the old Malvern place."

"Yes, I know. Word gets around."

There were shades of disapproval in her tone; disapproval not difficult to understand. The people of this area had kept their identity for many generations;

held to it stubbornly while a town down on Manhattan Island had grown into the greatest of cities.

But these people had kept the faith. They had remembered. In them, the new spirit—now almost two hundred years old and forgotten elsewhere—had remained bright. They'd held to the rigid concepts. And they had become quite aloof in the process.

So it was natural that they resented the modernization of Malvern Manor. It would bring outsiders into this land where residents of fifteen and twenty years were still considered visitors.

"I suppose you are planning some publicity," Miss Pender said stiffly. She hadn't given me her name. It was on a plaque on the cluttered little desk at which she presided.

"No, it's just a personal interest. You see, I'm British. My grandfather was a student of the Revolution, so I have a natural interest."

"Try those two racks, Mrs. Cater. Unless you have some specific book in mind, I'd suggest you browse a bit."

I thanked her and moved in among the stacks. The first book I selected was some sort of first-person account of Revolutionary times. The craftsmanship was bad, and it appeared to have been privately published. I opened it and read a passage at random:

The Tories, entrenched in their grants and estates have much to lose. They hold the divine right of kings over the heads of the common folk and thus declare the sanctity of their holdings. . . .

That was not exactly what I'd been looking for. I put the book back and searched further. Then I returned to the desk and asked, "Do you perhaps have

a book on the hanging of an American spy named Bennington? Richard Benington?"

"Oh yes," Miss Pender said. "That was a most tragic incident. And most romantic. The best account of it was done by our Mr. Ludlow."

"Mr. Ludlow? There is a tavern near Patch Lake—"

"Yes. The Ludlows are a very old family. The tavern was established by Isaiah Ludlow in 1805. James Ludlow, the man who wrote this book, was of a much later generation. The president of our local bank." Miss Pender got up and went to a shelf, returned with a paperbound volume. Her voice became hushed. "He died only three weeks ago. Mr. James was devoted to the Revolutionary period. He published this book himself." Now she seemed a shade reluctant. "Please be careful with it. It is the only copy we have."

I thanked her and took the book to a reading table where I sat down and opened it. I had expected an amateur effort at vanity publishing and was happily surprised at the good job Mr. James Ludlow, the bank president had done. The book was ably tabled and indexed, and I soon found what I wanted—a chapter titled: *A Gross Cruelty of the Time.*

> . . . . The British came openly now and billeted a portion of General Howe's regiment at Fort William, their purpose to frighten and subdue the local Loyalists by the very presence of the stern red coats and gleaming bayonets.
>
> They were an arrogant lot, symbolizing by their presence the tyrannical attitude and purpose against which the Loyalists, who were already

rooted deep in this new land, had militantly declared themselves.

There was pillage. Squads of the king's soldiers moved over the countryside with their wagons callously appropriating goods and provender for their own sustenance. It is on record that Silas Benson, a sturdy and provident farmer at Goad's Hill, was left bayoneted and bleeding as they drove his herd of beef away. And that was but one of their savage depredations.

There was rape and the vile molesting of women. A squad of Howe's despicable rogues came to the farm of Cecil Bennington when only the women were present. The men of the king were intoxicated at the time and had savage sport with the four women present. Two of the good Cecil Bennington's bond servants were cruelly raped by the fiends, and beautiful young Abigail, the wife of Richard, son of Cecil, was stripped and made drunken sport of. Truly a dastardly crime!

This was the situation found by young Richard when he returned from his labors. He was a handsome, fiery young man who led and inspired the resistance to tyranny that was frightening the fat British king on his faraway throne. Young Richard went berserk with rage.

Cecil Bennington was away in Boston at the time and thus not present to give wise counsel to his inflamed son, for young Richard ran like a madman to Fort William.

He was seized and questioned By David Cain, the lieutenant in charge, since General Howe,

that English aristocrat, was occupied elsewhere.

Lieutenant Cain held inquiry and was apprised of the situation. But justice was not his concern because his own welfare was at stake. General Howe, and this must be conceded, would have at the very least, frowned upon the horrible incident. He would have held his lieutenant accountable, and Cain would have received a black mark.

So the truth had to be obliterated. Richard Bennington was consequently accused as a spy. A drum-head trial took place where solemn lies were originated and written into the sorry record in order to sponge over the truth and give it the tinge of defensive rumor.

Young Richard was found guilty and sentenced to hang.

An added cruelty was perpetrated when Abigail Bennington, arriving at the fort in search of her husband, was held there and forced to witness the hanging of her husband on the following morning.

The horror of this unsettled Abigail's mind. She became as a child and went through an agonizing sickness. When the brain fever was at its height, the poor girl destroyed herself. She accomplished this with a painful poison, and it was said that she spent her last dreadful hour as maniac, screaming out threats of vengeance against the murderers of her beloved Richard.

The tragedy was blunted soon afterwards by the outbreak of the war, and nothing was ever done to punish the evil doers.

> Only Lieutenant Cain made retribution. A few days after Abigail Bennington's death, conscience-stricken, he plunged from the window of his quarters at Fort William and was freakishly strangled by a tree that impeded his descent, a branch somehow throttling him to death. . . .

I sat staring at the page, no longer reading. As I closed the book, the hand that reached forth to press its covers together trembled noticeably.

The account could have been accurate or not. It certainly appeared from the slanting of it that James Ludlow was hardly an objective historian.

But what he hadn't touched was more interesting than what he had. The death of Lieutenant Cain. Obviously, his death had been recorded as suicide. But a fall from any of the windows in the fort wing of Malvern Manor would hardly have been fatal. And with a tree to break the fall, even less so.

But of course, it had all happened a very long time ago.

I took the book back to Miss Pender and she smiled brightly. "Did you find what you wanted?"

"Yes, I did. Thank you very much."

"The death of Richard Bennington, you know, has grown into a local legend. There is a song that was quite popular at one time—*The Ballad of Abigail Bennington*."

"I've heard some of the verses."

Miss Pender's smile softened, revealing a sentimental depth that was not apparent on the surface. "Abigail, from what we know, was an exceptional girl.

Either that, or the legend has built her into one. A sensitive person. She loved the land and the animals and the trees. They say she could make roses grow twice as large as anyone else around. There are verses in the ballad that tell how she understood the language of the trees."

It appeared that Miss Pender was becoming somewhat carried away. Which was all right, except that she was hardly the type.

"There was another death at Malvern Manor later," I said. "The English wife of James Malvern. Is there any data on that? Around 1910 I believe."

Miss Pender's frown reflected lack of interest. It was not difficult to see that this constituted modern history as far as she was concerned and was thus out of her realm.

"Not here," she said. "Of course, our local paper was in existence then. There may be some account of it in their files. Also, Jim Malvern was well known. The city papers no doubt took note of his wife's death."

But it was obvious that it had been just another death to Miss Pender. The Revolution had long been over by 1910.

I thanked her and left the library. . . .

TYCOON'S WIFE DIES MYSTERIOUSLY

James Malvern's Bride Meets Tragic End

That was the headline and the subhead in the file copy of the *Chilton Times* that Editor Calvin Bains dug out for me.

Calvin Bains was of indeterminate age and ex-

tremely thin. He wore large purple arm-bands on a shirt built for detachable collars, but it was doubtful if a collar had ever been attached.

He was not talkative. I introduced myself and told him what I wanted, and he honored my request as if it were a routine thing with him. He went away and I heard him digging around back in the dim dustiness of the newspaper office. Then he shuffled forward with a bound volume; he opened it, straightened up, and snapped his arm-bands.

"That's the issue, Mizz Cater. And there's a little on the story in the next two issues." He paused. "We're a weekly, you know."

I nodded, having been aware of that. Without any further words, Calvin Bains turned and went back to whatever he'd been doing when I'd invaded his premises. I turned to the story before me:

On Wednesday last, two days before this issue of the *Chilton Times* went to press, the wife of James Malvern, the well known financier, met a tragic death at Malvern Manor, the palatial new residence which, it is rumored, Mr. Malvern created as a gift for his young bride.

Elizabeth Malvern was found dead beneath one of the windows of the vast manor house. There were no witnesses to the tragedy, so how Mrs. Malvern got to that particular spot is a mystery.

It appeared, however, that she had fallen from the window under which the body was found. There were abrasions on the arms and throat ac-

cording to Dr. Todd Helm, our County Medical Examiner, but these could have been the result of Mrs. Malvern's fall through the branches of the large oak tree that stands beside the mansion at that point. Death resulted from strangulation, but there was no rope or cord around the throat when the body was found.

Rumors of suicide were no doubt based upon unconfirmed reports that Mrs. Malvern's emotional state had been a grave concern to her husband ever since their arrival at Malvern Manor.

Mr. Malvern has gone into seclusion and no statements from him have been forthcoming. However, County Sheriff Benjamin Turner states that violence has been definitely eliminated as a possibility in the tragedy.

Therefore, the *Times* can only assume that Mrs. Malvern met her death as a result of a freak accident.

I closed the file. The stuffy little office seemed to have grown darker and chillier. Somewhere in the back, Calvin Bains was rattling metal type, and it sounded like teeth from old skulls falling to the floor.

Highlights from the news story flashed like broken tape through my mind: . . . *abrasions on the arms and throat . . . the large oak tree that stands beside the mansion . . . no rope or cord . . . emotional state . . . grave concern . . . freak accident. . . .*

Two deaths, generations apart, linked evilly together in one afternoon. Somewhere, of course, in the

files of the British Army there would be the report of the strange death of one Lieutenant Cain. But that appeared to be of no consequence now.

I left the office of the *Times* and climbed into the jeep. Dab would be waiting at the cottage. He would want to know where I'd been and why I'd taken so long. He would be hungry and ready for dinner. The sun would go down and darkness would cover Patch Lake and the forests around it. Darkness would cover the murmuring oak at Malvern Manor.

And the grave of Abigail Bennington in the old cemetery.

As the jeep labored along the narrow dusty road toward Patch Lake, I straightened my shoulders and spoke aloud. "I'm not afraid of you, Abigail Bennington."

But I was.

At that moment I was cold with fear. . . .

Twelve

As the jeep rattled and chugged toward the cottage, my spirits were indeed low. What had my afternoon gained me? Little more than historical verification of what I'd feared. Nothing of encouragement. Nothing to still my fears.

All I had done was to bolster my certainty that the future was to be dreaded.

But then, quite suddenly, I realized that my afternoon *had* been fruitful. I was now aware of the tragic background that made Abigail Bennington what she was. This alone drained some of the terror from the black cloud that hung over me. In a sense, it brought the occult, the supernatural, into the realm of reality.

Also, the data I gained that afternoon gave me something more. A feeling of deep compassion. I pitied Abigail. Through understanding, I would avoid the corrosive self-injury of a counter-hatred.

But more important still: I was now clear of the self-doubt that had been confounding me. The delusion—or even the hope—that the whole nightmare had sprung from within myself, was now without foundation. The existence of Abigail Bennington and the malevolent forces pitted against me were *not* figments of my subconscious. There was

no doubt about it. Abigail *did* exist. I was not mentally unbalanced.

I knew.

It was not necessary for me to understand the mechanics of the occult to believe in Abigail Bennington; no more so than not understanding atomic fission could make me doubt the bomb. The bomb was a reality despite my technical ignorance.

So was Abigail Bennington, the pathetic, mad spirit which, for some reason I could not grasp, was bent upon my destruction.

With my own strength and common sense, and—above everything else—with my hand firmly in Dab's strong grip, Abigail Bennington's evil would not prevail at Malvern Manor.

This I resolved. . . .

I found Dab in a restless mood when I arrived at the cottage. I kissed him, and the kiss I got in return was a preoccupied peck.

"How about dinner at Sam Ludlow's, darling?"

Dab scowled and shook his head. "I'm getting a little fed up with that place. Sam never sweeps the damn floor."

"As a matter of fact, I am, too. I'll throw something together."

"What's in the house?"

"Well, nothing really—"

"Then what can you throw together?"

"There are some eggs—"

He ignored this for problems more pressing than food. "We've got to move in to Malvern—live there.

Dick and Madge Verne aren't going to let us have this place forever."

"Have they been in touch?"

"No," he replied crossly, "but we can't impose on them indefinitely."

Dick Verne was an old college friend Dab had kept in touch with. Dick and Madge both worked in New York City and were wonderful, generous people. The use of the cottage had been their wedding gift along with a bottle of the imported champagne Dick wrote copy for at his ad agency.

"But if they aren't going to use it—"

"We have a place of our own," Dab snapped. "We aren't charity cases. We don't have to sponge off other people."

"But Malvern is hardly liveable yet."

"Do you mean that a few inconveniences would throw you?"

"No. It isn't that at all."

"Then what is it?"

I refused to admit even to myself that moving to the dark, brooding mansion frightened me. I would not concede for a second that dread was my immediate reaction to the idea.

"The inconvenience, I suppose," I said, for lack of something more convincing.

"Look—Pagan—until we get on our feet there, we'll have to face plenty of inconveniences. I thought you realized that in the beginning."

I laid a hand on his arm and spoke with wifely understanding. "Dab—what's the trouble?" This was a wrong gesture. He jerked away from me.

"Damn it, Pagan, don't patronize me! I'm not a little boy with a stubbed toe!"

My nerves were tighter than I'd realized. "And I'm not a camp follower to be barked at every time some little thing goes wrong!"

"Some *little* thing! Do you realize what this project's costing us?"

"Of course I do!"

"And it's only a *little* thing! You have strange ideas—"

"Dab! If you'll remember, I was the one who told you in the beginning that our capital was too small."

"I remember that," he replied, his voice dripping with acid. "I could hardly keep from commending you on your loyalty and encouragement."

"Dab! You're being unfair!"

"Unfair to ask a little cooperation from my wife?"

"You can be so maddening!"

Invariably, Dab's storms were of surface outbursts, but they could be violent. "If you'll recall, you've presented me with some problems of your own. The necessity of worrying about your stability—"

"I won't accept that! It's cruel! That stupid psychiatrist was your idea. Not mine. I was humoring *you*. You weren't contributing to *my* welfare."

"Wonderful!" he gritted. "Just great! Having my own sincere efforts thrown back in my face!"

"Dab!"

He saw my tears coming, but he chose to use them only as added fuel.

"Sure! Start bawling. The female's great weapon. A few sobs and a stricken look, and the male is supposed to pull in his sails and cringe."

"You're hateful! Just plain hateful! And I was stupid! I interpreted a pleasant chemical affinity as—"

"Don't be disgusting. Don't try to reduce things to a sex basis!"

In a quarrel of this sort, one of the antagonists usually turns tail and retires from the scene. In most cases, it's the female.

But Dab was more quick-footed than I. He snatched his jacket and headed for the door. I watched him regretfully, angry at myself for not having beaten him to it.

Left in command of the field, I could of course have been rated the victor, but for me it was a hollow triumph. My confidence in myself was shaken once more. I'd come home with every intention of establishing an even more solid rapport with Dab. No more fights; only complete understanding from that point on. Instead, I'd rushed head-on into the bitterest battle we'd ever had.

But this time I wasted no energy in tears. Those that came dried quickly, and I lunged into the quick job of packing my things.

It was the end. The finish. Our marriage had been a mistake. I'd been a starry-eyed fool. Now I had only one course. Repair the situation by getting out! Make everyone happy. Dab's stuffed-shirt family would declare a holiday. Dab would be delighted at having his problem solved for him. He hadn't the foggiest notion of how to even begin being a husband.

The end of the dream and the nightmare.

Back to England. . . .

The bag wasn't very heavy. I hadn't brought much for what was supposed to have been a week-end; a

week-end that telescoped into a crazy, impossible project. The rest of my things were in the furnished kitchenette apartment we'd moved into in Manhattan temporarily.

Dab, as thoughtful and considerate as usual, had taken the jeep. That left me with my two feet and the road ahead, but I was not daunted. Filled with the strength of righteous rebellion, I would cover the five miles to Chilton on wings. And the wait for a bus, however long, would be a small price to pay for the stupidest mistake of my life.

Thus did my mind chase its tail in a circle as I strode along; as the night deepened and brush and briars tore at the legs of my slacks; as the dark shapes of the trees loomed ahead and forced me into an erratic path.

Brush? Briars? Trees? My mind, far more chaotic and uncontrolled than I'd imagined, had become a leash held by an invisible hand. And like an obedient dog, I followed.

The dark woods. The laughter. Abigail Bennington roaming free of her grave once more.

Pagan Cater. Paaagaan—Caterr—I'm waiting.

I stopped and stood rigid. "Damn you! Damn you! What do you want of me?" Not knowing whether the keening, fish-wife retort was my voice or the voice of my tortured mind; aware only of my screaming defiance.

Come to me, Pagan Cater.

"I won't! Damn you and damn your rotten grave. Get back into it with the worms! I won't go there!"

No, not to the graveyard. To Malvern Manor. To the place that was mine now, not Abigail Benning-

ton's. To the place where my loved one and I had put down our roots and would stay.

How clever of her. In defiance, I had surrendered blindly. Now I was drawn to her power; followed her will to the place of her greatest strength; went whimpering through the darkness to the lodge.

The old fort wing waited in oppressive silence. I stared at it, more fascinated than fearful. Familiar with the grounds now, I crossed at the end of the pond and went to the shed where the Hog Hollow workers stored their tools. I opened the door and thought at first that the thin squeak came from its hinges. But that was not true. I had disturbed a rat.

It moved in front of me with a high-pitched snarl, yet I was without fear. I had changed. I was now at home with rats and ancient graves and spirits that arose like foul smoke from another world.

I kicked the rat and it squealed in pain and scuttled off.

We had purchased three strong-beamed electric lamps, and I took one of these from a shelf and held it up in triumph; as a weapon against Abigail Bennington's darkness. I snapped the switch and the lamp threw a sure, white beam.

It hit the Hanging Tree, and it was like striking some dozing monster. A sudden hissing rose from the tree's depths, as though I'd disturbed a thousand hostile bats.

It occurred to me at that moment how Dr. Wincroft, secure in his sane, smug knowledge of things, would have interpreted that sound. The snapping of the light and the stirring of a breeze had come simultaneously. Nothing supernatural. Merely the wind, Mrs.

Cater. Control yourself. Look to your nerves. Take a tranquilizer.

Stupid! All of them. Walking through a world and seeing only its material reflection. Seeing only what they wanted to see. Fools.

The tree must not be touched.

I remembered that. Abigail Bennington defended the tree with her power. Therefore the great oak was important. Somehow, in the mechanics of the occult, the tree *was* Abigail's power. Quietly, sanely, I applied the logic of the material to the supernatural. The laws of logic were universal. They held on all planes.

"Destroy the tree and I destroy you, Abigail."

I spoke aloud and the tree heard, and its hissing was a terrible sound. Every leaf a vibrating tongue of malice.

Abigail heard too, and her power whined and snarled around me.

The tree must not be touched.

"I shall destroy it and destroy you."

The room, Pagan Cater. Open the barricade. Go to the room.

I laughed. I was mad, of course. As mad as she. But there was strength in madness, and I needed the strength so I accepted what had to be.

"Damn the room! Damn you! I'll destroy the tree!"

There was dynamite in the shed. It was to be used for the removal of rocks blocking the ski run. I found it and removed five sticks. Taking these and a shovel, I left the shed and moved toward the tree.

It had sprung to life now. Hissing and snarling, a writhing mass of panic. Abigail Bennington, loose on

the night, ravened around me like a hideous black mouth.

But I had no fear.

I moved in under the tree, and its branches reached down toward me. A wind had sprung up but it was not a natural wind. The black surface of the pond whipped and frothed. The grass lay flat against the ground. The great oak leaned toward me with every lethal branch.

But a new power had come to me. It was a form of exultation. Never in my life had I felt so fiercely alive; so keenly strong and vibrant. I was drunk with power.

My power. Greater than Abigail Bennington's.

She flailed against my face and body, but I walked to the trunk of the tree and knelt with my light as the branches screamed in frenzy over my head.

It was a huge growth, its trunk extending outward into a shelf on all sides but one. At that point the trunk went straight down into the ground, and there was soft earth close to it. A small bush grew there.

I dug close beside the bush and found a space between two of the roots. I made a small cave in there while the tree screamed and threshed its arms as if in pain.

Then something happened that should have made me cringe in horror. I raised my eyes and the branches of the great tree—those brushing the wall of the building—were drawn away and held momentarily by a blast of wind. And I saw a light. It glowed from between the planks that had been spiked over the window of the room above. There were perhaps two inches of space between the planks, and light came from a candle in the room beyond the window

—a small yellow tip that flickered and was withdrawn, only to appear again in the higher space between the next two planks.

The light of a candle in a room that had been sealed off for fifty years.

It should have rocked me to my depths but it did not. This, because climax cannot be balanced upon climax. The human mind can accept just so much. And crouched there at the foot of that maddened tree was climax enough. Nothing could be added. So my mind recorded what I'd seen—*a candle glowing from the room in the old fort wing*—and returned to the business at hand.

I thrust the dynamite into the hole.

Pushing hair out of my eyes, I stepped back. What now? Dynamite didn't just go off by itself. It had to be ignited. A fuse. I knew so little. I turned away, confused.

Then there was a rending in the branches above, and the Hanging Tree struck out in its own defense. A great arm came down and thudded against my head. There was a screaming hiss of triumph. I staggered a few steps and fell. . . .

Thirteen

I OPENED MY eyes. Day was breaking. I lay in the grass and someone was kneeling beside me. I was dazed and chilled.

"Help me—please—"

"It's all right, Mrs. Cater. Don't try to talk. Let me help you inside."

Trubal Elder. He was there beside me in the cold dawn.

I started struggling to my feet, but he swept me up in his arms as though I were a child. He was stronger than his appearance indicated.

"The storm broke that branch off. It hit you on the head."

"Not the storm. The tree. The oak tried to kill me."

It was a heavy branch, six inches thick at the base. Trubal Elder looked at it and then at the tree. "What were you doing here?"

"I came to destroy the tree."

He was striding toward the manor house, and he carried me inside where he had cleaned up one of the rooms to use as an office. There was a lounge and he laid me down on it and said, "You're cold. You might take sick. I'll build a fire."

He soon had a blaze crackling in the fireplace. He pulled the lounge close, and I stretched out my hands toward the blessed warmth. It was a typical early

morning in summer, rather pleasant. But I had lain in the rain for a long time. The blow should not have put me out for so long. Perhaps it was emotional exhaustion, I thought.

"You should get out of those clothes."

"My bag is out there somewhere." But instead of hunting for it, Trubal Elder brought two towels and a pair of coveralls. "Take off your clothes and dry yourself. Rub your skin to redness. Then put those on and I'll hang your clothes by the fire. They'll dry quickly."

He went away and when he returned I was huddled in front of the fire in the coveralls.

"How were you going to destroy the tree?"

The question seemed unimportant. "It was the tree itself. Not the storm. The tree and Abigail Bennington. She was free of the grave, and her power was strong."

He said nothing.

"It *was* the tree! The storm did not break the limb. The tree tried to kill me!"

"I'm not contradicting you. But why is it so important that you convince me?"

"I don't know. I guess it's because you're the only friend I have. You and Dee. The only ones who believe."

"There *was* a storm. A branch broke and fell on you. That's how it is from the evidence. But did you do what I suggested?"

"What?"

"Find out why Abigail Bennington wants to kill you?"

"I did what I could. I went to Chilton and checked the library and the *Times* office."

"What did you discover?"

"I read an account of Richard Bennington's hanging. It may or may not have been accurate. In the newspaper office I went through the story of Elizabeth Malvern's death. She was English. It isn't difficult to draw a conclusion."

Trubal Elder, his gaunt face inscrutable, had hung my clothes along the fire screen in front of the blaze. My bra fell off, and he picked it up and put it back on the screen.

"They will be dry soon. Are you feeling better?"

"Yes."

He had examined the bump on my head and announced that the skin had not been broken.

"The conclusion you've arrived at. What is it?" he asked.

"Lieutenant Cain was English. He died in that old fort room. Elizabeth Malvern was English. She died there. I am English. Obviously, the spirit of Abigail Bennington hates all Britishers and seeks to avenge the death of her husband again and again."

"That may be true. But it does not hold water in your case."

"Why not?"

"Because I am English. I was born in London. I came to America when I was quite young, it's true. But time means nothing to Abigail."

"And she has never been hostile to you?"

"Contemptuous by not hiding herself from me. But not hostile."

"Then why her hatred for me?"

"I don't know."

"And what would be the value of my finding out?"

He seemed older. Thinner. More worn. The erect arrogance with which he'd first met me by Abigail's grave was gone. "I don't know. It's just that I believe in knowledge as the foundation of all success. In a military campaign the general with the greater knowledge has the advantage. Knowledge has always been the tool of the victor."

Seeing Trubal Elder's weariness and confusion frightened me. And the events of the night before all seemed so vague and distant now.

"Why were you here last night? Why weren't you with your husband?"

"We quarreled."

"That's unfortunate."

"Perhaps it was for the best. We aren't suited to each other. He's good—well meaning—but not too intelligent. There are certain types of people who are—well, infuriating."

"What do you mean?"

There was an old mirror in the room, and when I turned my head I saw my reflection on its cobwebby surface. I'd changed. My face had grown harder. There was a cruelty in the eyes that stared back at me. The Abigail Bennington kind of cruelty. They were the eyes of a woman who could make a statement like that concerning her husband.

It was as though I were two persons in one body. The new Pagan Cater, and the old, softer, weaker Pagan Cater who was fading.

I saw this and accepted it calmly, telling myself that hardness goes with strength; that the old Pagan had to change or perish.

"It's what you just said—about knowledge. Dabney is concerned about me, of course, and I suppose it's natural that he sees me as being emotionally disturbed—insane."

"I'm sure it hasn't come to that."

"He sent me to a psychiatrist. I went to humor him." Here I paused to laugh. "He sees me as mentally unbalanced but sees nothing wrong in his own eccentricities. What is your opinion of a man who for years carried twenty thousand dollars around the world in an old teddy bear? Is that the mark of an even mental keel?"

"It depends."

"Upon what?"

"The motivation. It isn't what a person does. It's why. What you mentioned could be the act of a totally insane person. Or it could be admirable."

"Admirable indeed!"

"Why did he do it?"

"Because of an aunt who gave him the money. She wasn't considered capable of handling her own affairs. Yet Dabney suspects mental weakness in *my* line. Most ironic."

Trubal Elder had seated himself beside me. He was looking into the dying fire.

I turned suddenly. "Help me—please help me. I'm afraid of her. I'm not strong enough."

He did not move—not even his eyes. "I could dig up her grave and scatter her dust to the wind."

"Be sensible."

"I could mouth incantations over her tombstone and make cabalistic signs."

"Help me!"

He turned fiercely. "I can't help you. I must defend my own. She has Dee in her power."

"That's why you stay neutral! You're afraid of her power too!"

"I can't help you."

There was a stirring outside. Trubal Elder went to the window. "It's the telephone men. They've come to string the wire from the main line."

"One thing—"

"Yes?"

"The old fort wing. Is it completely sealed off?"

"Jim Malvern closed it after his wife died. It has never been opened."

"There is no way in?"

"It's completely sealed off."

"And no one has been in there since that time?"

The insistence of my questioning irritated him. "Why do you keep asking about something that is obvious?"

"It doesn't matter. I have a job for you."

He started toward the door. "What?"

"Please get a crowbar or whatever it will take and remove those planks that block the corridor to the old fort wing."

He stared at me. "Is there any hurry?"

"I want it done immediately."

"But are you sure—?"

"I am positive."

There was a trembling behind the hard mask I showed him. He stared at me. I waited. I desperately wanted him to refuse; desperately wanted him to exert his old arrogant domination; the mark of his strength.

But he was not Trubal Elder any more. He was a tired old man afraid for a child he loved and could save only by being weak.

He nodded and left, and I sat for a while with my face in my hands. She was not there. She was back in her grave, resting, but she had taken more of my strength with her. Each time she attacked, she retired with part of my strength; just as she'd drained away Trubal Elder's strength; until he'd become a hollow, walking shell. She'd left him that, the shell of pride and arrogance. But now, with a contemptuous gesture, she'd shown me that there was nothing but the weary flesh and bones of an old man inside that shell.

I got up and slipped out of the coveralls Trubal had given me and began to dress.

Fourteen

THERE WAS a flatness about everything; an emptiness, as though my vitality had drained away and with it my will to win. I left the manor house and went out into the morning. I should have been hungry but I was not. My mind was sluggish, and in a kind of slow motion process it pondered that momentary glimpse of the candle in the window of the sealed room.

It did not seem very important, and in a short time I was able to call it an illusion; a distortion of reality along with so many other distortions.

The storm of the previous night had not been swept away. Heavy clouds still hung over Malvern Manor. As I watched them scud dark and menacing toward the sea, there was the sound of a motor, and soon the jeep broke through the undergrowth that blocked the road Trubal Elder had found for us.

Dab was at the wheel.

But the inertia I was experiencing extended to him also. It dictated the mood and nature of our meeting. I stood watching as he drove the jeep across the lawn that Trubal Elder's workers had cut and raked. He got out from behind the wheel, and there was no smile on his face.

"You came here last night?"

"Yes."

"I came back to the cottage and found you gone."

"You didn't search?"

"Was I supposed to?"

"No."

"I found you'd packed your bag. I drove to Chilton but you weren't there."

"I'd planned to go there. I came here instead."

"Have you had breakfast?"

"No."

"I'll make some coffee."

As he walked toward the manor house, a fine rain began to fall. I turned and raised my eyes, and the Hanging Tree stood motionless, not a leaf moving. I thought of it as a weapon Abigail Bennington used; a tool standing inert, awaiting her return.

And with that thought came the conviction that I was truly mad. My mind was not the same. It was not tortured. In a sense it, too, lay inert awaiting the final pronouncement of defeat.

But I didn't care.

I turned toward the manor house and, as I approached it, Trubal Elder came out and moved toward me. He carried a crowbar. He stopped. "I took those planks down," he said.

"Thank you. The men—they haven't come to work."

"They won't be here today. They are doing outside work, and it will rain." He paused, his eyes moodily covering the drab panorama of Malvern Manor. "Perhaps I was wrong."

"Wrong?"

"In helping and encouraging your husband to transform this place."

"Why did you do it?"

"To take it away from her. I thought the change and the activity might drive her out. I hoped it would break her power."

"Then you concede that she possesses a power."

"Have I ever denied it?"

Two defeated people mouthing aimless words. He moved on. I went into the manor house.

Dab was bending over the small iron stove they used to make coffee. The pot had not yet begun to boil. He glanced at me. "The coffee will be ready soon."

I saw the pain in his face and tried to classify it. A young pain as contrasted to my own, which was as old as time. His was the pain of not understanding, whereas mine came from understanding too clearly.

I sat down on the lounge. He stirred the coffee for a few moments, then turned suddenly and came to me. He stood looking down. "Pagan—what happened to us?"

"I don't know, Dab."

"We were so close. Then neither of us were there. We couldn't reach each other."

"We can always say we tried."

He dropped down in front of me and looked up into my face. "Have we tried? Really? As though our future depended on it?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Here we sit. And there doesn't seem to be any bridge."

He looked slowly into the fire while he took my hand and held it. But both our hands lay limp. "I've thought and thought," he murmured. Then he raised

his head with that quick, characteristic jerk I'd grown to know so well. "Pagan—I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what, Dabney?"

"Asking you to go to Dr. Wincroft. It was a stupid, smug thing to do. It hurt you terribly, didn't it?"

"I suppose it did, but you were justified. And you may have been right. Maybe something *has* happened to my mind."

"Tell me, Pagan! For God's sake tell me! Make me understand!"

"It just doesn't seem worthwhile."

"Try! Please try."

"Ever since we came here, I've sensed a Presence. It began that first time I came into the woods and told you I'd found an old graveyard."

"A Presence? Pagan, I—"

"I know who she is—a girl who died over a hundred years ago. Her name was Abigail Bennington. Her husband was hanged as a spy during the Revolution. Her spirit has lived here ever since."

He stared at me almost open-mouthed and I reacted instantly. "All right! You asked for it. Now sign a paper and have me put away!"

I'd jerked my hand from his, but he reached out and drew it back and gripped it hard. "Pagan! Do you realize what you're saying?"

"Of course I do! All that's necessary is that I repeat it before witnesses—your precious Dr. Wincroft—"

"Stop it," he retorted harshly. "That's not what I meant. I meant that you didn't *tell* me. I'm your husband, Pagan—the man you married. I love you

and whatever this terrible burden is—you didn't *tell* me!"

"It would have done no good."

He was angry. "Who are you to judge that? What right have you got to block me out of your life? I'm your *husband!* Your trouble is my trouble. What do you think marriage is?"

My mind was in chaos. This from Dab, the boy-adventurer who'd never grown up? My laughing mercurial lover? "Oh Dab—darling. Hold me! I'm so frightened!"

He pulled me into his arms in a frenzy of tenderness. "Pagan—baby! I ought to take your pants down and whale you. Of all the stupid—look—I'm here—I'm a part of you! Trust me!"

I was clinging to him—weeping against the warmth and the strength of him. "But you couldn't possibly *believe*—"

"Maybe—maybe not. But let me make my own decisions about that. This dead woman who's still alive. Give me the data. Let me have the lowdown!"

I began at the beginning. He listened and when I was through he thought in silence for a while before saying, "You're totally committed to the belief that all this is supernatural, aren't you?"

"I *know* it is, darling."

His face was close to mine, and I felt his vitality singing through me, bringing me back to life. I saw the deep strength behind his eyes and wondered why I'd never seen it before.

"Pagan—hasn't anyone ever told you about the danger of a closed mind?"

"Oh Dab! Don't go philosophical on me."

"Maybe it's time for a little philosophy. But suppose we just concentrate on facts for now. Exactly how has this spirit injured you?"

"Darling, *you* fell out of that tree."

"So? I was clumsy. Lots of people fall out of trees."

"The tree is her weapon."

He didn't ridicule me, even as it dawned on me how ridiculous the statement sounded. "All right, but I wasn't injured. What else?"

"There was—oh, Dab! I can't think!"

"Then perhaps I'd better think for both of us. This girl—the feeble-minded one."

"Dee? She's not exactly feeble-minded. Just retarded."

"As I got the story, she met you at the graveyard and told you all about Abigail Bennington being alive."

"Yes. She was there."

"All right. And now I want you to answer this question as honestly as you can: If she hadn't been there—hadn't told you—would you have had the least idea that Abigail was still hanging around?"

"I could *feel* her."

"Honey! Old graveyards are spooky places. They are associated with death, and people are conditioned to funny feelings in cemeteries. Especially when you stumble on them in a lonely woods miles from nowhere."

"If I'd really talked to Dr. Wincroft, those are the arguments he would have used, aren't they?"

"I don't know. I imagine they are."

"What did he tell you about me?"

"He said you were highly imaginative, high strung,

sensitive. And you were far from home for the first time in your life."

I found the courage for a small laugh. "A brilliant analyst."

"He also told me my job was to be sympathetic and patient and understanding. A fine job I did!"

I cuddled closer. I wanted to touch him and feel him and never have him beyond reach again. "You're wonderful!"

He either casually accepted the praise or missed it, I couldn't tell which. "You've talked to Trubal Elder about this spook stuff?"

"He believes it."

"Okay, what are his credentials as an authority?"

"He's a brilliant man. He speaks many languages. He has a Ph.D.—"

"I'd say things like that qualify him as a real kook."

"Why, Dab! He's highly educated."

"Honey, don't tell me you're one of those!"

"One of those what?"

"The kind who stands in awe of the academic chair. Lots of the craziest people are highly educated. All a diploma proves is that the holder was at a certain place at a certain time. Doesn't it seem odd to you that a man of Trubal Elder's background hides out in these woods and lives like a slob?"

"He's eccentric."

"Uh-huh. That I won't argue with."

"Dab! Maybe he's a criminal. Maybe he killed five wives or something and—"

"Just as Doc Wincroft said—highly imaginative." He held me fiercely. "Baby! Why didn't you talk to me? Why didn't you confide?"

I'd never felt so safe, so wonderful, so *loved*. "Because I'm a kook, darling. Why don't you spank me?"

And then somebody said, "Where do you want this phone?"

We looked toward the door and saw a young man in a slicker holding a telephone set. He wasn't at all embarrassed. He was smiling pleasantly; if two people wanted to stay in on a rainy day and cling to each other, it was obviously all right with him.

"Anywhere here I guess," Dab said, getting up from the lounge. "It will only be temporary."

"You're right about that," the phone man replied. "The line's hanging on clothespins and Scotch tape. But you'll get service."

"Nice of you people to cooperate."

The young man took his hat off. "Hear you're starting a ski lodge."

"That's the goal," Dab said. "A few things to do first, though."

"I broke my leg in Vermont two years ago. This will be great. It'll give me a chance to bust myself up closer to home. Good luck."

As he left, my spirits skyrocketed. What a fool I'd been! Abigail Bennington wasn't a spirit. She was an illusion! She was nothing more than a condition I'd created in myself through morbid meditations and a kind of sick solitude. And the cure was very simple.

People. Solid, sensible, ordinary people who put up telephone lines in the rain. Prissy little librarians like Miss Pender. Shuffling country editors like Cal-

vin Bains. People to whom mental disturbance was a myth that made psychiatrists rich.

A husband like Dab.

"Darling," I said, "this morning I told Trubal Elder to open the old fort wing."

"Good idea. It's time we looked it over."

"He took the planks down a little while ago."

"We'll take a look."

But then the telephone caught his eye. He picked it up and listened for a dial tone. "It's working." He thrust it toward me. "Here."

I took the instrument, puzzled.

"Why don't you call your mother?"

A wave of guilt swept over me. There had been one phone call on arrival, a letter, and several cards. But since we'd come up to the country on what was to be only a week-end, I'd gone completely out of touch.

I knew what Dab had in mind. He saw the call as mental therapy. Familiar voices as a security symbol. That was my vague idea of how it went. And I loved him for his thoughtfulness.

I put the call through, and the operator, after making several connections, came back on the line and said, "I'm sorry but there will be a short delay on your call. Will you be available at this number?"

I told her I would and hung up. Dab was standing there with the electric lamp in his hand. "Let's go and inspect our property, baby."

A few minutes later he was staring blank-faced into a room in the old fort wing and muttering. "Now just what in the hell is this?"

Fifteen

I WAS AS bewildered as he. We'd climbed over the pile of planks left lying there by Trubal Elder, and Dab had flashed his light along a dark corridor. It was narrower and lower than those in the rest of the mansion; and incredibly musty from the long years of oblivion. Dust was thick on the floor, and to me it was like stepping back into the 1700's. This was where they had lived, those Tories and Rebels. Time vanished for me, and I sensed the presence of men trapped by time and history. It was all there for me: the living, breathing past.

But there was also the reality of Dab's strong hand holding mine, and I banished the illusions, as—I told myself—I had banished the illusion of Abigail Bennington.

But then we were both hurled into unreality as we approached a doorway where daylight sifted into the corridor. It was the door to the room against which the Hanging Tree stood. We entered and stood there and Dab said, "This is crazy! Somebody's been kidding us."

The room was sparkling clean. The wide planks of flooring had been scrubbed and rescrubbed. Trubal

Elder had removed the planks from the window, and the window had been raised. We could see the tree beyond and the green bower formed by its close-hanging branches. The leaves rustled softly.

There was a polished mirror on the wall, and we saw ourselves in the inferior glass of early colonial times. There was a desk, which would have brought a high price in the city antique shops; and there was a large, circular hooked rug on the floor. Also a neatly made bed, covered by a patchwork quilt that was obviously handmade and as colonially authentic as the shots that had been fired at Concord Bridge so long ago.

"What the devil is this?" Dab demanded. "A closed-off wing! What gives?"

I remembered the candle I'd seen the night before, its ghostly light flickering from between the planks. Ghostly indeed!

"Trubal Elder took the boards off that window, didn't he?"

"I suppose he did. He didn't mention it, though."

"He's the man to see. Where is he?"

"I saw him outside when I was coming in."

Dab regarded the room, perplexed. "My first thought was that somebody's been living here. But now I don't think so. The room doesn't look lived in."

"I got the same impression," I said. "It looks more as though it had been preserved by someone. Like a room in a museum."

"But if they don't live here, what were they doing here last night when you saw the candle?"

Before I could answer, a sweet childish voice came

from the direction of the now-open entrance to the wing:

Satan slept at Rebel Hill,
When the Redcoats came.
He hung the brave young Richard,
And Cain was Satan's name.

"Dee Elder," I murmured, and then she entered the room.

Her smile was as sweet and gentle as the sound of her singing.

"Hello, Pagan."

"Hello, Dee."

"You've opened the old wing." It pleased her.

"Yes, dear. Grandfather Trubal took the planks away this morning."

"I'm glad. Abigail wanted it opened."

Dab was regarding Dee thoughtfully but without expression. He remained silent.

The great oak murmured. There was a stir of lazy breeze that moved two of the cramped branches. They pushed through the now-open window and lay thin and green on the sill.

"Did Abigail tell you that?" I said.

"She told you, didn't she? She told you to come to the room."

I glanced guiltily at Dab, but he said nothing. I returned my attention to Dee. "Dee, were you here last night?"

"Yes. Abigail called me. I was here when you tried to hurt the tree. Abigail was very angry."

"But I thought this wing was sealed off. How did you get in?

"The way I always do. Through the cellar. There is a window behind the bushes. You have to burrow in. It was never boarded up."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You never asked me," Dee said innocently. "If you'd asked me, I'd have told you."

"Do you come here often?"

"Oh, yes. Abigail wants the room kept clean. I cleaned it up when I was a little girl, when she first called me here. I've kept it clean and neat since then."

"Does your grandfather know you come here?"

A new voice broke in. "I had no idea." Trubal Elder's voice. He'd approached quietly, the thick dust of the corridor muting his footsteps. His deep, brooding eyes were on Dee. "I've been looking for you," he said.

I was angry. "Trubal, I met you outside after you'd opened the wing. Why didn't you tell me about this room?"

He looked at me as though I were an intruder and my question that of a prying outsider. "I wanted to find Dee. That was more important. Dee, I want you to go home. You must stay there. You mustn't come here again."

This distressed the child. "But Grandfather. Abigail depends on me to come here and—"

"That doesn't matter any more. You must do as I say."

The calm of Dee's expression broke. A great struggle was taking place in her groping mind. A battle of allegiances. To whom did she belong? To Trubal

Elder? To Abigail Bennington? To which of her masters did she owe loyalty?

She gave no sign of having made a decision, but she lowered her head slightly and said, "Yes, Grandfather Trubal."

"Go home now."

She started to leave, but at the door she turned and looked at me. "Pagan, Abigail told me to tell you something."

"Yes, Dee?"

"She told me to tell you that Elizabeth Malvern was the great-great granddaughter—" Dee stopped and her lovely face clouded. "I think that was it. Or maybe three *greats* instead of two."

"The great-great granddaughter of whom, Dee?"

"Of the general who brought the Redcoats here before young Richard was hung. I think the general's name was Howe—I'm not sure. Abigail was all blurry with anger when she told me."

"Go home, Dee," Trubal Elder repeated.

Dee left and Dab looked at Trubal with disbelief and frank amazement. "Does she actually think she sees that dead girl?"

I knew that an angry retort was on Trubal Elder's lips. His eyes flared up for a moment. Then the fire faded. "She's a strange child," he said.

"I'd say she needs help."

"Your opinion wasn't asked for," Trubal snapped.

"I'm sorry. I only meant that—"

"We take care of our own up here. We've been doing it for a long time. We don't hold to the idea that the government or anyone else is obligated to take care of us."

Trubal's anger surprised Dab. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to start a political debate—"

But Trubal was gone. We went to the window, and a few moments later we saw him striding through the light rain, following Dee toward Hog Hollow.

"There goes a troubled man," Dab murmured.

Then he straightened and shook off the mood of unreality. He smiled and said, "A kind of odd deal, but it's a break for us. We've got a place to stay."

"Here? In this room?"

"Why not? It's better than that dirty hole we're working from."

I tried to compress the surge of fear that had welled up. It was logically reactionary, that I knew. But I knew also that I must not prove myself a disappointment to Dab. Then, too, I was no longer alone. We were together. And even if there had been any substance to the Abigail Bennington story, which there was not, she would have been no match for our combined strength.

"Of course," I said.

We turned from the window, but Dab jerked up suddenly, and his hand was pulled from mine. "Damn!"

"What's the matter, darling?"

"We've got to trim that damned tree." He was scowling down at one of the branches that had been pushed in the window and at the small, jagged tear in his jacket. "Those branches have sharp snags on them."

I shivered. "It's chilly. I hate these wet, dark days. Doesn't the sun ever shine here?"

He grinned. "The weather is very unusual. But we

need the rain. There's been a drought. The people in the city have been short of water to pour their Scotch into."

I felt suddenly elated. I had Dab to myself. We were together, and we were alone, and there were no skies dark enough to make such a situation cheerless.

"Shall we look over the rest of it?" he asked.

"No. Let's go into the other wing and build the fire high and sit on the lounge together."

We went back to the other room and built up the fire. The glaze caught the logs, yellow, warm, beautiful, and the bleary world outside seemed to fade away.

Then it intruded again as the phone rang. Dab picked it up. talked, and put it down again.

"The phone man."

"What did he want?"

"Your call to England. It came through. But he's got trouble on our line now. Some bug because of the temporary way they had to bring it in. He'll have it fixed before they quit for the day, he said."

I stretched out on the lounge; it was pure luxury. "They can pull the wire out for all I care."

"That's what you say now," Dab grinned, "but what about when you start getting hungry?"

"Would Sam Ludlow bring us dinner?"

"That'll be the day!"

"Is there anything to eat?" I asked.

"Eggs. And maybe some bread for toast. The men brought some supplies when they started to work."

"Scrambled eggs and toast. How heavenly!"

We spent the rest of the day in blissful warmth and

proximity, but I was again plagued by the terrible thought: What if Dab and I had never met? "Darling, suppose we'd missed each other!"

"You and your imagination," he murmured as he thrust his nose into my neck. "Turn it off, or I'll sic Doc Wincroft onto you again."

"I pity the doctor."

"Why?"

"No particular reason, I pity everybody in the world because nobody is as happy as I am."

"Well, how many of them," Dab retorted, "has such a fine upstanding husband—ouch!"

"My, but you're fun to pinch, darling. Give me another excuse . . ."

The day passed. The mournful weather continued through the evening and into the heavily falling night.

Dab yawned. "Bedtime, honey. That beautiful patchwork quilt awaits us."

Outside, the wind was plaintively announcing the oncoming storm.

Sixteen

THE BED was soft and warm and comfortable and Dab's arms around me formed a tight, safe world of drowsy delight. He had drifted off and for a while I listened to his heart beat. Then I counted my blessings. They were many, but they all had the same name: Dab—Dab—Dabney Lewis Cater—my husband.

Then I went to sleep also. But I dreamed of Abigail Bennington.

It was not a nightmare, though, because my newly acquired strength was with me in sleep, and I was not afraid of her. Nor was I in her power.

She was a face, a darting, mad face superimposed over the place she'd held sway; over the dark, frothing pond and the pitching forest and the empty mansion at the foot of Rebel Hill. A face that dimmed and brightened, faded and became clear, but always a mad and snarling visage of Medusa-like vileness and savage hatred.

I'm not afraid of you, Abigail Bennington.

The tree must not be touched.

The tree will be pruned tomorrow. It will be stripped of its branches.

The wild, frantic, raging tree came into my dream-

vision. It was in the heart of a raging storm, and it flung its limbs wildly about, trying to reach me.

But it could not because I was safe in Dab's arms.

Then Abigail Bennington's savage face became one with the tree of bad wood—the tree that had become Abigail Bennington's evil tool. Lazily, dreamily, I wondered what that meant.

Satan slept at Rebel Hill,
When the Redcoats came.
They hung the brave young—

. . . Dee Trubal lilting her eternal verse in my dream.

Trees do not know, Abigail. Trees cannot remember. It is all nonsense.

Abigail Bennington's voiceless scream: *The tree must not be touched.*

We will prune it tomorrow. Dab said—

I was awake. The dream was torn away and I was awake and upright in bed and this was reality. But the reality far more horrible than any nightmare.

The storm was at its height, and I could see what was to be seen by the flashes of lightning that flamed outside.

And what I saw was Dabney struggling with the tree. The two slim branches that had been lying across the sill of the open window were now ten, twenty, thirty.

They were live and vengeful tentacles reaching out, and Dabney was fighting for his life in the midst

of them. They had wrapped themselves around his legs and arms, and one was encircling his throat.

I screamed and threw myself at the gnarled, writhing mass enveloping him like enraged pythons. And now the branches were pulling him toward the window—

I clawed at them in animal frenzy, my screams surmounting the howl of the storm outside. The whip-like branch around Dab's throat was strangling him. He tore at it, and his face darkened. Other branches wrapped themselves around his arms and legs and drew him closer to the window.

I clawed and screamed and flailed . . . futilely.

Then there was a pause, an empty moment when it seemed the branches were gathering their strength for one final assault, in which Dab would be pulled through the window and hurled to the ground; a moment when the howling storm paused as though gathering strength also.

Then a thunderous roar that filled the world.

The entire fort wing shuddered in the wake of a great shock wave. My mind, convulsed in chaos, blind to what was happening, continued to command me in panic. I continued to claw at the branches, unaware of the . . . change that had come over them; refusing to believe at first that it was not an hullucination that the tree was . . . relenting, retreating, surrendering.

It was as though some vast death, some great draining of power, had taken place. The tree's menacing power—indeed its very life—was suddenly gone, and there was only a tangle of foliage.

I looked out through the window and saw that the whole structure of the Hanging Tree was swaying. It was a strange, dignified movement, fraught with meaning. Slowly it drew away from the wall, its impotent limbs pulling away from Dab and retreating through the window and out of the bedroom. Then, moving faster and faster, the great oak—its trunk shattered, its evil and savagery spent—crashed to the ground.

Dab and I must have lain dazed for a time because when my next coherent thought came, it was to realize that the moon was shining in the window. Its beams were cool and serene.

"Dab—oh, Dab. It tried to kill you. Abigail tried to destroy what is most precious to me, just as the only precious thing in her life was taken from her—"

"Hush."

He held me.

"I—"

"Don't say anything. Be quiet."

"You don't understand."

"I do understand. But it's over now."

"Lightning hit the tree—split it—"

I was aware of the emotional upheaval that Dab was trying valiantly to control. He took my hand and we went to the window. The oak had fallen away from the house. It was a dark mass stretched across the lawn, the white wood of its shattered trunk glowing in the moonlight.

Pronouncing each word carefully as though enunciation was an effort, Dab spoke casually. "That saved us a little work. I'd decided to cut that tree down. It took up too much room."

"The storm is gone. There isn't a cloud in the sky."

"Yes, it blew away fast. Well, there isn't anything more we can do tonight. Let's go back to bed."

And I understood. It was exactly the right thing to do. . . .

Seventeen

"BUT YOU'RE mistaken," Trubal Elder said. "There was no storm last night."

It was mid-morning, and we stood by the edge of the pond. The men had returned, and Dab was busy supervising the removal of the shattered oak.

"Trubal!" I protested. "How can you say such a thing? The wind was almost of hurricane force. The rain came in buckets—"

"Did you actually see any rain?"

"Well, no. I was inside the house. But the crashing thunder, the lightning that destroyed the tree—"

"I destroyed the tree."

"You!"

He turned his eyes downward. I followed his gaze and saw a wire lying in the grass. It extended toward the old fort wing. He bent down, picked up the end and started rolling it into a small coil.

"The tree had to be destroyed. I realized that after I left yesterday. I'd compromised for Dee's safety too long. I finally realized that the compromise endangered her the most."

"I never took the dynamite away."

"That made it very simple. I didn't realize you were in the bedroom. I thought you and your husband were in the other wing."

"But you must have heard me scream."

His eyes fixed mine. "I heard screams, yes. But I have heard them before. So have you."

"But the lightning—the howling wind."

"There was no lightning. There was no wind."

I shook my head, dazed. "It's odd, but I can't seem to get a grip on it with my mind. It's as though everything keeps slipping away."

He nodded. "I know."

"No storm—"

"Abigail fought. She battled for life. She died hard."

"She's dead?" I asked dully.

Thrusting the coil of wire into his pocket, he strode swiftly away. His shoulders were straight now and he was the old Trubal, a coldness in his face, an inherent contempt in his bearing. . . .

I wanted to see Dee. I knew where she would be, and I went there.

She was standing beside Abigail Bennington's grave, and as I approached I saw a puzzled look on her face.

"Hello, Dee."

"She isn't here."

"Are you sure she ever was?"

Dee ignored the question. "She's gone. It's as though she'd never been." Dee looked down at what had once been a mound but was now a sunken place in the earth. "It's only a grave, Pagan. Just like all the other graves. Isn't that strange?"

I put an arm across her shoulders and we walked toward the ridge. After we climbed it she paused to look back.

"I don't think I'll ever come here any more."

"There will be no reason to. What would you like to do now, Dee?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said vaguely. "Go to school maybe."

"You've lost a lot of time."

"Yes."

"That doll. I never got it for you," I said.

"The doll? Oh. I guess I don't want it. I thought I did, but—"

"You're too grown-up for a doll?"

"I guess so."

I wondered how Trubal Elder would react. All the so-called backwardness was gone. I squeezed her closer in the crook of my arm.

"Dee! You're wonderful. I don't want to lose you. We must stay close."

"I'd like that," she said softly.

As we came in sight of Malvern Manor, a man standing by the front door caught sight of me and beckoned. When I got there he said, "The phone, ma'am. A call for you."

I went inside, and soon the operator's pleasant voice greeted me as though only moments had passed since yesterday. "Your call to England, miss. I have your party."

"Thank you."

A familiar voice came over the wire. "Pagan! My dear! How are you?"

"Aunt Elizabeth?"

"Of course. Your mother isn't here, child. She went up to London. I talked her into a two-day holiday."

"I'm glad you did. Aunt Elizabeth—I have a question."

"What is it, dear?"

"You'll think it's crazy, I know, but can you tell me if we're in any way related to a British soldier named Cain. He was a lieutenant in the British Army dring the Revolution."

"Good heavens, child. The whole Cain branch of the family was in the military. The men, that is. That's why the line died out. They were too busy fighting to have children." She paused. "What are you laughing about?"

"I didn't realize I was laughing."

"Child, what's wrong with you? Such a ridiculous question to waste toll charges on. I could have written you a letter."

"It's all right, Aunt Elizabeth. Don't bother. It isn't important. I was just curious."

"What on earth have they done to you over there? I'm afraid I'll have to come over and—"

"Do that! Please. Dab and I are building a beautiful ski resort. You'll love it."

She sighed and said something about this mad younger generation, but I didn't get all of it.

After the connection was broken I went to the window and looked out at the sky. The clean, washed, beautiful sky. The storms were over.

I suddenly had to be close to Dab; to touch him and feel his hand on mine.

I rushed from the room and down the hall, a happiness welling up in me that was almost too great to bear.

At the main door I paused for a moment and whispered: "Goodbye, Abigail. Please don't hate me any more."

But as I hurried out into the sunshine I knew the plea was unnecessary. I knew that all the hatred and the mad thirst for vengeance had been washed away. Something told me that somehow, somewhere, she was in Richard's arms.

"Goodbye, Abigail," I whispered again, and ran to where Dab was standing.

Just to touch him. . . .

THE END

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